Policies for Reporting Test Results to Parents

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What are the state and district policies on reporting test results to parents? How well do local districts follow state policies?

Educational assessment in American schooling is becoming more frequent and more influential every year. It is estimated that each year elementary and secondary students take 127 million separate tests as part of standardized test batteries and that the annual cost to taxpayers is approaching one billion dollars (National Commission on Testing and Public Policy, 1990). The proliferation of testing has been accompanied by greater reliance on tests scores for educational decision making. Test results are routinely used as measures of educational quality and public accountability. The allocation of funds, the placement of students, and the evaluations of teachers are often based on students' test scores. Therefore, consumers of test data need to understand the complexities of educational assessment in order to understand these critical decisions.

Although testing specialists and administrators often have the expertise to make these decisions, other consumers of test data—teachers, students, and parents—have been overlooked. Teachers who do not understand how to use standardized tests diagnostically may be unable to use assessment to promote learning. In a survey of 2500 Arizona teachers, Nolen, Haladyna, and Haas (1989) found that nearly half felt unprepared to discuss test results with parents and the overwhelming majority thought standardized tests were a waste of time. Smith (1991) identified several adverse reactions that teachers have about external testing of students, including feelings of embarrassment and anger among teachers about the publication of test scores, distrust about the validity of the tests, dissonance created by pressure to raise test scores, and guilt about the emotional impact of testing on students.

Students are also consumers of test data and should not be ignored. Many students misunderstand and mistrust standardized tests; this may contribute to their anxiety, halfhearted effort, anger, and counterproductive strategies while taking tests (Paris, Lawton, Turner, & Roth, 1991). If students are informed about the purposes of testing and the implications of test results, they may understand their own performance better, adopt effective test-taking strategies, and develop positive attitudes about educational assessment.

Surprisingly, parents are often uninvolved and uninformed about assessment practices. To strengthen connections between home and school, parents need to receive comprehensible information about their children's achievement. If parents do not understand the tests given to their children, the scores, and how the results are used to make decisions about their children, they are prohibited from helping their children learn and may become disenfranchised from educational decision making. According to Kearney (1983), the lack of information provided to consumers about test data has sweeping, negative consequences:

> Individual student needs are not met, parents are not kept fully informed of student progress, curricular needs are not discovered and corrected, and results are not reported to various audiences that need to receive this information and need to know what is being done with the information. (p. 12)

This implies that students, parents, and teachers will all benefit from the provision of better information about educational assessment.

The first step in improving the quality of information available to consumers is to determine current practices for providing assessment feedback. This article reports a series of three surveys that examine state and local policies for disseminating information to parents about statewide educational assessments as well as the degree of understanding that parents have of this informa-

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tion. There are several reasons why it is important to assess parents' understanding of educational testing. First, norm-referenced and criterion-referenced tests, along with report cards, form the basis of parents' evaluations of their children's academic progress. These reports, especially among older students, are the primary information that parents receive about their children's academic achievement. If parents do not understand measures of student achievement, then they may not provide appropriate support for learning and motivation. Second, parental satisfaction or discontent with local schools often depends on media reports of test scores. Although invidious comparisons among schools and districts are discouraged by policymakers, the publication of test scores often increases misuses and misconceptions of tests scores. Parents who misunderstand test scores may draw erroneous conclusions about their children's teachers and schooling.

Third, it is important to assess parents' knowledge about assessment because parental attitudes and expectations influence children's choices of academic courses and expectations for success. Parents who have accurate and comprehensible information about their children's test performance are likely to have more realistic academic expectations for them and provide appropriate learning activities. Parents' beliefs about children's abilities and expectations for their academic performance help to establish children's academic expectations and shape their actual performance (Baker & Entwisle, 1987; McGillicuddy-DeLisi, 1985). In fact, parental beliefs about their children's aptitude are more important determinants of children's self-concepts of ability than previous grades or test scores (Parsons, Adler, & Kaczala, 1982). Thus, parents' interpretation of information they receive about educational assessments can be important for children's subsequent achievement-related beliefs and performance.

Despite these compelling reasons to examine what parents know about educational assessment, there is surprisingly little information available about state policies, district practices, and the information parents actually receive. Furthermore, parents' comprehension of basic facts about mandated assessments has not been examined. The purpose of our study was to gather information about the knowledge that parents have about educational assessment, specifically standardized testing. This series of studies addresses the following questions: What policies do states adopt for reporting test results to parents? How do districts extend and implement state policies for informing parents and disseminating test information? Do parents understand the purposes of the tests that their children take and the information provided to them about their children's performance?

Survey of Statewide Policies and Practices for Informing Parents

The purpose of the first survey was to compare data from state educational agencies throughout the U.S. on the policies and practices for reporting individual students' results to parents. State directors of educational assessment programs were surveyed to determine state policies for reporting test results to parents. Questionnaires and postpaid return envelopes were sent to the testing directors in each of the 50 states in 1987. Forty-one testing directors participated by returning the questionnaires. The 16-item survey was divided into sections that dealt with the frequency of statewide testing, policies for reporting results of statewide testing to parents, decision-making responsibilities, and the information provided to parents. The 4-page survey could be completed in 20 minutes.

All but 5 of the 41 states in the survey reported a state-mandated assessment program. By 1990, though, only Iowa and Wyoming did not require districts to assess students' achievement (Coley & Goertz, 1990). The types of tests administered varied widely, with 21 states giving norm-referenced tests, 25 administering criterion-referenced tests, and many states giving both kinds or allowing districts to select their own tests. The following analyses are based on the 36 states that mandated statewide testing in 1987 and completed the surveys. (Telephone calls to 10 testing directors in 1991 indicated few changes in policies or practices for reporting information to parents since 1987.)

Although most states have extensive assessment programs, directors in 16 states reported that there was no state policy for reporting individual test results to parents. Only 9 states had laws that required that parents receive information about statewide tests (i.e., state legislation that requires dissemination of test results). Thirteen states had policies adopted by state school boards suggesting or requiring that information be disseminated to parents. Some of these policies resulted in the same type of information being delivered to parents as was delivered in those states with laws that required information to be disseminated to parents. However, many of the state policies resulted in a delegation of responsibility to local school districts.

The most common method of feedback was sending an individual student report to the parents, but this practice was only required by 13 states. Usually individual reports included only percentile rank, percent correct, or the percent of objectives passed. No state mandated that parents be informed about student progress since the last testing; nor did any states require that parents receive information on strategies they can use to help their children perform better. Thus, there was no diagnostic or remedial function required of the reports that were sent home. Only 2 states required any explanation of the relation between test results and school programs or academic performance. Additional information, such as narrative explanations of the relation between test results and other outcomes, was sometimes suggested by the state educational agency but was not mandated. It is interesting to note that only 5 states had ever evaluated their own policies. Although most of the policies had been in existence for a decade or more, no effort had been made to determine if parents received and understood their children's test results.

State directors were asked to rate the relative amount of control that the state department of education and the local districts had over the

information and type of report that parents received. More than half of the states responding to the survey reported that local districts had primary responsibility for determining the information that was sent home. In addition, there was limited state-level follow-up of the district practices. Only 17 of the states with policies or laws indicated that they monitored district compliance in some way. Thus, even when there were state policies mandating dissemination, the districts were often responsible for the information that parents received and for their own compliance with state mandates.

Policies and Practices Among School Districts for Informing Parents

The first survey revealed that state departments of education seldom mandate policies for reporting test results to parents. It is most common for states to pass the responsibility on to local districts, which must make practical and logistical decisions about the most feasible way to provide information to parents. These decisions relate to such issues as whether parents should receive their child's score in the mail, whether teachers should provide explanations of test results during parent-teacher conferences, and whether individual schools should be allowed to establish their own policies for disseminating test results. Like a number of other states, Michigan delegates the responsibility for dissemination of results to the local districts. The purpose of our second survey was to examine the policies and practices of Michigan school districts for providing feedback to parents about the Michigan Educational Assessment Program (MEAP). MEAP consists of criterion-referenced tests, primarily in mathematics and reading, that are administered each year to all fourth, seventh, and tenth graders. The third survey, to be discussed later, examined parents' knowledge of MEAP.

For the second survey, a questionnaire and postpaid return envelope were mailed to each of the superintendents in Michigan in the spring of 1987. Of the 525 districts, 201 completed and returned the surveys, a return rate of 38%. The respondents included large urban districts, such as Detroit, and rural districts throughout the state that represent all levels of economic conditions in Michigan. Although the return rate was not as high as we wanted, the variety of districts provided a representative cross section of Michigan school districts. The questionnaire, designed to complement the information received from the state directors, included 16 questions about district policies for reporting students' MEAP test results to parents.

Although MEAP has been used in schools for more than 15 years, only a small proportion of school districts had policies for reporting test results to parents. Fifty districts (25%) had formal or informal policies for reporting MEAP results to parents. Of these 50 districts, 64% had formal policies and 36% had informal policies.

About half of the 50 districts reported that policies were first implemented when MEAP was introduced. The survey also asked districts why they had instituted a policy of reporting test results to parents. Of the 50 districts, 35% responded that they wanted to ensure and maintain effective parent-teacher communication. As these data suggest, relatively few districts had adopted guidelines for reporting test results to parents despite the widespread interest and long-standing practice of collecting statewide achievement data in Michigan.

Some districts used more than one feedback technique: 68% sent individual reports home to parents; 40% held parent-teacher conferences (required by district—4%); and 33% used newsletters. The requirements for the content of this feedback varied across districts: 52% required schools to report the percent of objectives passed by each student to parents; less than 6% required schools to use supplementary strategies (such as explaining the relation between test results and classroom performance); 61% of the districts suggested that schools provide parents with strategies that they can use to help their own children; and more than half of the districts suggested that schools send information to parents, such as explanations of the relation between students' test results and curricula, explanations of the relation between test results and academic performance, and the diagnostic uses of test results.

These findings demonstrate the good intentions and positive suggestions of a majority of the school districts. Nonetheless, there is a clear discrepancy between the suggestions and actual practices. Although they had the potential to provide parents with a wealth of information about how their children are performing on tests, school districts actually provided relatively little data and explanation. Data from the Michigan State Board of Education (1987) indicate that most school districts feel that teachers, parents, and students should only be provided with individual reports when the *district* considers it important or on a "need to know" basis. It appears that parents are considered the least important consumers of test data and are provided with limited information. In defense of local school districts, however, they have relatively small budgets for disseminating test results and limited resources for explaining test data to parents.

Districts had little knowledge about parental satisfaction with reporting policies, and they did not routinely conduct evaluations of their practices. Only 6% of districts had conducted evaluations, and the responses received from parents had reportedly been positive. Most respondents did not report that designing policies and making changes in their reporting practices was an important issue. Seventy percent had no plans for making changes in their policies or practices for reporting test results. Of the 30% that did plan changes, all intended to use the scores to change the curriculum, school practices, or the amount of information sent to parents.

Parents' Understanding of A Statewide Achievement Test

Despite the prevalence of standardized testing, we were surprised to find no studies in the literature concerning parents' understanding of tests or the accuracy of interpretations of their children's performance. What information about educational tests do parents receive and what understanding do they gain

from these materials? The results from MEAP are disseminated in several formats so that they can be reported to districts, schools, and individuals. The Parent Pamphlet (an MEAP report form) summarizes the child's performance, gives specific information on how to interpret the results, and conveys general information about the test philosophy. Although the pamphlet is often available, it is unclear whether parents read and understand its information.

In the third survey, we examined parents' knowledge about MEAP. A 42-item questionnaire was used to assess parental understanding of and satisfaction with MEAP. Specific areas investigated included the parents' sources of information, their satisfaction with those sources, their knowledge of both essential details and the general philosophy of the testing program, and their satisfaction with the program. Relevant background information about respondents was also collected.

The questionnaires were sent to parents in two districts that were typical of many school districts in Michigan. One was representative of small towns in Michigan with populations of less than 25,000. The other was a working-class suburb and represented a typical urban population of a large industrial city. Teachers distributed questionnaires to fourth, seventh, and tenth graders in three schools in each district. Students were given the questionnaires to take home to parents at the end of the school year in which the students had taken the test. Parents returned the completed questionnaires anonymously by mail. Since the purpose of this survey was to examine the understanding of Michigan parents in general and not to compare parents in different districts, responses from the two districts were combined and analyzed together.

Of the 105 respondents, 86% were mothers and 14% were fathers or guardians. The total response rate of parents averaged 32%. Although this is a low response rate, the data from these parents can still tell us a great deal about what information parents receive and understand about MEAP. If they are not representative of all parents in Michigan, the respondents are likely to be those parents who are most involved in their child's education. It is these parents who would be expected to understand the purpose and meaning of MEAP results. In addition, the sample was well educated. Only 12% had not completed high school, 20% had completed high school, 37% had completed some college course work or technical school, and 31% had completed college. Therefore, to the extent that these parents show a lack of understanding about MEAP, one could argue that a more representative sample of parents would have even more difficulty interpreting their children's MEAP test scores.

Sixty-two percent of the respondents identified more than two sources of information about MEAP. The sources included the parents' own child—64%; state report form—46%; teacher—42%; school newsletter—31%; school meetings—19%; and newspaper or television—12%. More than 63% of the parents were satisfied with the information conveyed about the test by the state report form, the teacher, and the school. They reported that this information was helpful and clear. Only 32% of parents rated newspaper or television reports as helpful and clear.

When questioned specifically about the methods that the school used to convey test results, 20% of the respondents said that they did not receive any information. Those that said they received information from the school indicated the following methods: individual report form—62%; class averages—32%; explanations of scores by school personnel—30%; discussion of results at a parent-teacher conference—25%; and written suggestions for improving the child's school performance—12%. Most parents (82%) said that their children had done as well as they would have expected. When asked if MEAP had contributed to their child's educational achievement, only 53% responded positively. Even so, 87% thought that the state should require students to take MEAP tests.

Parents' knowledge about MEAP was assessed with 19 questions based on information that the state MEAP office recommended for presentation at parent-teacher sessions. Parents appeared to understand the general purpose of the MEAP testing program. Parents also understood that the results could not help to identify good teachers or students with behavior problems. More than 80% were aware that the test results could reveal which basic skills students have mastered and which skills might need improvement; 71% reported that the test results could help schools to examine the curriculum; 62% knew that the results could help teachers to plan instruction; and 68% knew that results allow school districts across Michigan to compare achievement levels.

Despite this knowledge, many parents were clearly unable to interpret information essential to understanding their own child's performance and were unfamiliar with many diagnostic features of MEAP. Only 35% knew how mastery of a basic skill objective was measured. Only 50% knew how many basic skill objectives must be mastered to pass the test. Seventy-eight percent thought that a child who achieved 100% of the objectives would have answered all questions correctly (which is false). Only 9% realized that MEAP could not test how much children have learned about basic skills in their current grades. Less than 33% knew that students with learning problems could not be identified by the test. Only 42% realized that the test could not measure all areas of the school curriculum.

Although MEAP is a criterion-referenced test, only 18% of the parents knew that MEAP does not measure each child's ability in comparison with all other students who took the test. Thus, 82% of surveyed parents believed that the percentage score achieved by their children indicated a *normative* achievement level. This poses a problem because nearly 90% of students in Michigan pass 85% of the objectives in reading and mathematics; thus, most students have scores exceeding 85% (which is *not* the 85th percentile). The high degree of parental satisfaction with MEAP scores may be due partly to the overwhelming misconception of parents that their children are all achieving in the top 15% of students throughout the state.

Parents were knowledgeable about

their rights; 93% indicated that parents have the right to know their child's MEAP scores. They were not clear about the distribution of decision-making powers between the state, district, and school. Only 58% responded correctly when asked if the school principal could decide not to give the test, and less than one-third realized that the school district could not make decisions about whether to give the test. The majority of parents (89%) indicated that they understood why children were required to take the MEAP test. However, most had misconceptions about the functions, uses, and interpretations of MEAP scores. Finally, it is useful to note that parents were somewhat accurate in evaluating their own knowledge. Those who reported that they understood why their children took the test gave an average of 9.9 correct responses to the 19 questions about MEAP whereas those parents who were not sure why their children took the MEAP test only had an average of 5.7 correct. Even parents who reported good understanding of MEAP missed half of the items.

General Discussion

Despite the long history and increasing frequency of standardized testing in the U.S., there has not been an emphasis on dissemination of information to parents. Although the first survey found that most states had mandatory statewide testing, a substantial proportion had no state policy for reporting test results to parents. Many states left the responsibility of informing parents to the districts. The districts, in turn, often did not mandate dissemination. The results of the second survey indicated that a large majority of districts in Michigan did not have policies for reporting MEAP results to parents. When information did reach parents, it was often only numerical information, such as percentile rank or percent correct. Few states or districts required that parents receive supplementary information, such as explanations of the relation between test results, school curricula, and academic performance. The lack of understanding displayed by parents was evident in the third survey. Although their children had taken the MEAP test earlier in the year and parents had received information about MEAP from the schools, parents understood little of the information suggested by the state education department.

The lack of knowledge about the test exhibited by parents could lead to misinterpretation of their children's scores and subsequent incorrect beliefs about their children's abilities. This could be manifested in false assurances about the presumed success of their children or inaccurate estimates of their children's accomplishments. For example, a substantial number of parents misinterpreted criterion-referenced tests as normative assessments and equated the percent of objectives passed with their child's normative ranking in the district or state. Perhaps this type of fundamental error in the interpretation of educational assessments contributes to American parents' high degree of satisfaction with their children's performance in school compared to lower satisfaction of Asian parents (Stigler, Lee, & Stevenson, 1987). Such illusory satisfaction may also underlie parents' beliefs in the usefulness of the tests and their validity as indicators of educational accountability. Because parental beliefs influence the educational outcomes of the child, they are important concerns for teachers and policymakers. For this reason, it is essential that parents receive accurate and comprehensible information about tests and test results.

There are several recommendations that can be derived from this research. First, state departments of education should invest more effort to inform parents about students' performance on statewide assessments. Policymakers at state and local levels must develop stronger linkages to create, implement, and monitor effective reporting practices. Local school districts can benefit from state assistance in deciding on appropriate formats for test results and determining cost-efficient and useful methods for disseminating that information.

Second, local school districts must assume greater responsibility for working with school administrators and teachers to develop effective approaches for involving parents in the academic lives of their children. Districts should not assume that the current approaches are appropriate, informative, or useful because few parents complain. Apathetic and misinformed parents may be falsely satisfied with their schools' testing programs. Periodic formal or informal evaluations must be conducted by local school districts to ensure that parents have access to complete information on educational assessments.

Third, local school districts will need to reestablish schools as the places where parents can best learn about their children's educational needs and performance. As shown in the third survey, newspapers and television are useful sources of information for parents, but they are not a substitute for school personnel as critical sources of information about test scores. School districts need to encourage school administrators, teachers, and parents to determine collectively the kinds of knowledge that parents receive about school experiences. In fact, as states and districts develop new forms of educational assessments, parents should participate in the design of report forms and practices for disseminating test results.

Fourth, policymakers and other school personnel cannot rely on one approach alone to increase parents' awareness. A combination of methods may be needed to make parents aware of the tests that will be given to their children, the purpose of the tests, the results of the tests, and the uses of the data. The test report form alone is unlikely to be sufficient. Other useful resources for the parent include media, newsletters, and teachers. Districts that use several kinds of tests, such as norm-referenced, criterion-referenced, and minimum competency tests, need to be particularly clear in explaining these results because parents are unaware of the differences among these tests. Clearly, districts need to develop practices that are sensitive to the educational levels of the parents as well as the grade levels of the children for whom the reports are intended. If these recommendations are implemented, parents may become more knowledgeable about their children's achievement and more able to promote their learning.

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