Initial Responses to AERA’s Position Statement Concerning High-Stakes Testing

The AERA has published its position statement here, and on its website, in order to make it readily accessible to the many educators and policymakers presently confronting issues related to high-stakes testing. To encourage thoughtful discussion of the position statement, a number of knowledgeable individuals holding different perspectives on high-stakes testing were invited to share their reactions with ER readers.

Misuses of achievement tests are bobbing up across the educational landscape like the water-carrying brooms in Walt Disney’s version of The Sorcerer’s Apprentice. I find it hard to reconcile the rising tide of test misuse with my belief in the value of test performances, along with other relevant information, in making high-stakes decisions about individual students. The AERA position statement may help stem the flood: High standards for test use support high educational standards for all.

The flood tide of poorly designed or implemented and—pardon the pun—untested test-based educational policies is partly the product of tensions within American education, like that between homogeneity and heterogeneity in the classroom. Test-based grade retention is very like our mostly discredited tracking practices within grades, which channel slow learners to classrooms with low standards, an impoverished curriculum, and poorly prepared teachers. One difference is the seeming objectivity and visibility of test-based placement decisions. Another is the much higher costs of the latter—both to students and to educational systems.

The AERA statement projects a beacon amidst the current flood. Its dozen paragraphs describe key standards for high-stakes test use that could eliminate the worst abuses of the current high-stakes testing fad and help make achievement testing a valuable tool for improved learning for all students. The statement should not be controversial. It is drawn from and closely resembles other well-constructed professional standards for test use.

Unfortunately, the position statement focuses more on what not to do, rather than on how to place students in beneficial educational settings. A next step is to offer positive models of the appropriate use of tests for student, school, and system accountability in standards-based reform.

What else should be done? Publish the Joint Standards on the web—not in an obscure and costly book. Link it and the AERA position statement in many locations—academic departments, school systems, and popular home pages. Use the media to enforce standards of appropriate test use. What if the AERA, like the American Association of University Professors, were to publish committee reports on educational systems that violate or uphold our standards? We know a lot about what’s right and what works, and we should tell the world before we lose a generation of students.

ROBERT M. HAUSER
Vilas Research Professor, University of Wisconsin–Madison


Like the content standards established for students, the statement represents the goals toward which states and their contractors are working. The statement reflects what is desired for all state tests and assessments. But just as all students have not yet met the standards, not all state tests and assessments will immediately meet the goals contained in this statement.

States and their contractors must continue to work toward the goals, striving to modify existing programs and measures and to construct new ones that do meet the goals—just as we are asking students (as well as teachers and administrators) to continue to work toward the high standards that have been set out for them. In some instances, it also means seeking legislative changes. That is the reality of our current world—imperfect as it might be.

Like students, state testing and assessment programs should not be “condemned” for initially failing to meet the goals expressed in the AERA position statement. Rather, their progress toward the goals should be monitored, with assistance and support being provided. An appropriate role for the research community is that of the constructive critic, providing assistance and support while monitoring progress.

If the research community chooses to view the AERA position statement as representing “absolute conditions” that must be met before a state can use a test or implement a new program, then it becomes a potential weapon for the critics of standards-based reform that may be used to attack reform efforts across the country and erode public support for standards-based reform. Under these circumstances, the research community may be viewed as a destructive critic—despite the ethical intentions embodied in the AERA position statement.

WAYNE MARTIN
Director, State Education Assessment Center
The AERA statement on high-stakes testing is a welcome contribution to the public debate. In particular, it clarifies an ambiguity in the Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing by explaining that providing multiple opportunities to take a test does not circumvent the injunction not to make decisions "on the basis of test scores alone." Because of this point and its general clarity on a variety of other key assessment issues, the AERA statement is helpful. In the face of far too much testing with far too severe consequences, the AERA positions, if implemented, would be a step forward relative to current practice.

However, several critical issues remain unaddressed. First, what is the appropriate use of tests in education? For example, the statement refers to using tests as "part of making high-stakes decisions," but it does not clarify a boundary between acceptable and unacceptable weightings for tests. FairTest believes that standardized tests should be used as no more than a very limited source of information in educational decision-making.

At present, the other most important use of educational tests is to define and control curriculum and instruction. FairTest believes this is an egregious misuse of tests that has consistently damaging consequences for student learning, particularly for low-income and minority-group students (Neill, 2000). While the AERA position statement does call for avoiding "a narrowing of the curriculum" as well as for ongoing study of the effects of testing, it fails to challenge the flawed assumptions underlying test-driven "reform."

Finally, will the AERA take public steps to help stop the misuse of tests? FairTest urges the AERA to actively rally its members and the institutions for which they work to become publicly engaged in the issue. The AERA also should devote resources to disseminating its position to federal and state policymakers. Such endeavors would begin to put some teeth into the statement.

In sum, while FairTest believes the AERA should go further in working to stop the harmful consequences of the overreliance on tests, the current statement makes a useful contribution within the current political context. Its ultimate impact, however, will depend on whether the AERA actively takes its position into the policy arena.

References

Monty Neill
Executive Director, FairTest

Audrey L. Qualls
Associate Professor, The University of Iowa
The AERA position statement on high-stakes testing in preK–12 education is both useful and timely. The statement is based solidly upon the recently revised Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing. There is no question as to timeliness. In the summer of 2000, Education Week explored the breadth and depth of a backlash against high-stakes testing. But the interest in high-stakes testing goes much beyond educators; the August issue of Atlantic Monthly contained a feature article on high-stakes testing as well.

High-stakes decisions about schools and students will be made whether or not tests are involved. Some people act as though getting rid of high-stakes assessment will also get rid of bad decisions about students and schools. That is simply not true. The question is, can high-stakes assessment improve student achievement of worthwhile content? I think it can. To make that happen requires avoiding standards-based reform on the cheap. Simply using an off-the-shelf test for grade retention is not nearly good enough. On the other hand, requiring a perfect solution to every conceptual and technical problem, before doing anything, will result in nothing ever getting done.

In the complexity of designing and implementing a useful high-stakes assessment program, it is easy to lose the forest for the trees. There are three essential criteria for a high-quality, high-stakes assessment program. First, the program must set a good target. The assessment must demand an ambitious, worthwhile curriculum. Second, the program should be symmetric. Schooling at its best involves students and educators working together to produce high levels of student achievement. A high-stakes assessment program should not hold students accountable without holding educators accountable for achievement, as well; and the reverse is equally true. Third, the high-stakes assessment program must be fair. There are two huge issues of fairness, one for students and one for schools. If students are to be held accountable, then they must have an adequate opportunity to learn the material being tested. If schools are to be held accountable, then they must be provided the tools to be effective: materials, technology, professional development, and the like. Not only would it be unfair to hold schools accountable without providing them appropriate resources, it would also likely have only a minimal effect on student achievement.

States and school districts that use the AERA position statement to guide their practices will be doing high-stakes assessment right. The results should be better student achievement on more challenging content, and a narrowing of the achievement gap between students from more affluent and less affluent families.

Andrew Porter
Professor, University of Wisconsin–Madison;
President-Elect, AERA

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AERA INSTITUTE ON STATISTICAL ANALYSIS FOR EDUCATION POLICY

CALL FOR APPLICATIONS

The AERA Institute on Statistical Analysis for Education Policy is an annual training opportunity sponsored by the AERA Grants Program, which is funded by the National Science Foundation (NSF) and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). The 2001 Institute will focus on substantive higher education policy issues that can be addressed by logistic regressions and multinomial logit analyses applied to the longitudinal data from the National Postsecondary Student Aid Survey (NPSAS) and the national Survey of Recent College Graduates (NSRCG).

DATES AND LOCATION
April 9-10, 2001, Seattle, Washington (preceding AERA’s Annual Meeting)

INSTITUTE FACULTY
Directors: Martin Carnoy (Stanford University)
Michael Nettles (University of Michigan)

Faculty: John Dossey (Illinois State University), Susanna Loeb (Stanford University), Paula Knepper (NCES), Drew Malizio (NCES), Edith McArthur (NCES), Catherine Millett (University of Michigan), Larry Suter (NSF), John Tsapogas (NSF)

PARTICIPANT GRANTS
A select group of scholars will be chosen to participate in the Statistics Institute, held in conjunction with the AERA Annual Meeting. Those selected for participation will receive support covering the Institute’s fees, housing, and per diem for the period of attendance. Travel expenses are not included.

APPLICATIONS
Priority will be given to those applicants with scholarly activity in issues of policy and practice using quantitative approaches, who are committed to using NCES and/or NSF data sets, especially B&I, BPS, NPSAS, or NSRCG. Minority researchers, advanced graduate students, and recent doctorates are especially encouraged to apply. Applications must be received by January 5, 2001. All awards are contingent upon AERA’s receiving continued federal funding.

Further information on this Institute and other AERA Grants Program opportunities may be found on the AERA Grants Program website (http://aera.ucsb.edu) or contact:

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PRESIDENTIAL ADDRESS
• The Top Ten Things That Parents Want to Know About Testing: How NCME Can Help — John Fremer

CAREER AWARD ADDRESS
• Problems, Pitfalls, and Paradoxes in Educational Measurement — Robert L. Brennan

COMMITTEE SPONSORED SYMPOSIA
• From the Printing Press to the World Wide Web: Implications for Knowledge Acquisition and Assessment — Graduate Student Issues Committee, Organizer & Moderator: Lora Monfs
• Fairness in Testing: Applying the New Standards — Joint Committee on Testing Practices, Organizer: Julie Noble
• Minority Issues in Testing — Minority Issues and Testing Committee, Organizer: Mary E. Yakimowski-Srbnic
• Test Security in a High Stakes Environment: Myth or Reality? — NATD, Organizer: Mary E. Yakimowski-Srbnic
• Five Years of Classroom Assessment Development: A Washington State Assessment Showcase — Organizer: Rick Stiggins. A demonstration showcase directly following this symposium will include poster and technology-based presentations of Washington teachers’ classroom assessment accomplishments.

INVITED SYMPOSIA
• Artificial Intelligence: A ‘Smart’ Choice for Educational Measurement? Organizer: David M. Williamson
• The “Three Vs” meet the “Three Rs”: Computer-Based Testing in the Schools — Why, What, and How Organizer & Moderator: Randy Bennett
• Important Topics in K–12 Large-Scale Assessment: A Measurement and Policy Perspective on Each Organizer & Moderator: Gary A. Schaeffer

HIGHLIGHTED SESSIONS
• Automated Essay Graders: Performance Assessment in the New Millennium Organizer & Moderator: Mark D. Shermis
• Increasing the Usefulness of Achievement Test Scores Organizer: Judith A. Koenig
• On-the-Fly Generative Adaptive Assessment of Quantitative Reasoning: Content, Psychometric, and Technological Perspectives Organizer & Moderator: Isaac I. Bejar
• Testing Accommodations: Raising a White Flag or Waving a Checkered One? Organizer & Moderator: Gregory J. Cizek

NCME FITNESS RUN/WALK
• Run 5K or walk a 2.5K course in Myrtle Edwards Park along Elliot Bay with views of the Olympics Mountains, Mount Rainier, and Puget Sound.
• Commemorative T-shirts and canvas bags will be given to all participants.
• Check the NCME webpage in the spring for upcoming details and course photos: http://ncme.ed.uiuc.edu/

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