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Pushing Test Boundaries Beyond the Horizon
By UCLA IDEA

Last week, the federal government awarded $330 million to two consortia of states to overhaul current standardized assessments. Over four years these states, California included, will work with university professors and others to design new, technology-based assessments that would assess the sort of complex, higher-order skills that current tests cannot touch.

Secretary of Education Arne Duncan spoke glowingly of the project, saying the new tests would address one of the biggest complaints he has heard from teachers: "bubble tests pressure teachers to teach to a test that doesn't measure what really matters." The use of technology "makes it possible to assess students by asking them to design products or experiments, to manipulate parameters, run tests and record data," Duncan said.

The push for new assessments is prompted by new national learning standards. The money was allocated through the Race to the Top funds after almost 40 states signed on to the Common Core Standards this summer. The new proposals include many testing approaches that are already in place in countries that rank highly on student performance.

One group of states, known as SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium, will create computer-based exams that can adapt to student responses, delivering the most appropriate questions as the student progresses. Prompts could even ask students to demonstrate research skills. The Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career, though similar, will feature tests throughout the year that would offer instant feedback to teachers and would allow them to adapt instruction to student progress.

To the extent that standardized tests are driving current reforms—including teacher evaluations, student promotions and punitive measures for schools—it makes sense to create new assessments to reflect learning accurately. It is hard to criticize a sincere effort to make exams more relevant—especially considering the limits of current testing; however, the influx of federal funds and a four-year commitment from 43 states and the District of Columbia raises many questions. Simply "improving" tests does not ensure we get the assessments we need.

The consortia are engaged in *development* proposals that participating states must enact within four to five years. Who will be monitoring and publicizing the states' (and the test's) readiness for high-stakes decisions? For example, the current online technology in many schools is primitive, teacher training and participation is expensive, and there is no end in sight to the overall financial crises in states like California.

The proposed assessments test only English and math. What will happen to other subjects that also matter if those subjects are not supported by the tests? Will music, art, literature, history, civic engagement, languages, and so forth remain on the back burner while the flame of standardized testing lights up a few measurable skills?
What options or permissions will states have to override or supplement the tests? For example, will it be possible for states to test ELL students in their home language?

Testing "what really matters," asking students to probe deeply into higher-order tasks, and adapting instruction based on "instant feedback" require much more than an infusion of technology-based instruments. Quality learning, or globally competitive learning, if one prefers, doesn't happen within a tight loop of student, test, teacher, and back around again. New tests are encouraging if they stand alongside a well-trained and well-supported teaching profession, adequate school facilities, informed and engaged communities, extended-day school programs, attention to students' health and much more.