



# THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

*Week of Nov. 29-Dec. 3, 2010*

## High and Misplaced Hopes for Student Testing

By UCLA IDEA

No one can dispute that standardized tests drive much of what happens in our schools. Yet, as public schools and their employees reel from the effects of budget cuts, a good deal of “reform” energy focuses even more attention on testing. There’s a lot wrong with schools. And there’s a lot that won’t be fixed by redoubling attention to test scores.

A growing number of districts and states are talking about assessing teacher effectiveness based on how students perform on standardized tests. Some schools have also begun to give more weight to student test scores in determining student grades.

One recent example centers on the well-known phenomenon of grading students based partly on their compliance to rules, on what was once known as good “deportment,” on being quiet and not challenging the teacher or disrupting the class, and diligently following school routines around homework and punctuality. As anyone familiar with schools can attest, these important social behaviors are easily conflated with students’ learning. Students who teachers perceive as bothersome, but might have a firm grasp of the lessons, can be graded down (punished) for their behavior; and compliant students who are given good grades can be denied the challenges that would have them learn more. And teacher judgments about student behavior can be shaped by broader cultural biases about race and gender.

The New York Times reports that report cards in some schools and districts are deemphasizing homework, attendance and participation. That’s probably a good trend for a number of reasons. The article notes that in one Illinois school about 10 percent of the students who were earning good grades performed worse on the exams than their classmates—they did extra credit, got points for homework and class participation, but they had not mastered the content. According to one superintendent: “In this age of data and with so much information available to us we can no longer confuse how students act with what they know.”

Yet placing more emphasis on standardized tests does nothing to address the causes of student disruption or teacher biases. And even if the test results provide some useful data on what students know and can do, this information means little if schools don’t have the resources to create better opportunities for all students to learn—regardless of their behavior or perceived motivation.

In another example of how tests can drive change without improving learning opportunities, the Los Angeles Unified School District is considering moving the school calendar up a few weeks so students start classes in mid-August and end earlier in June. The district said the move could show academic gains for high-school students, who would take their first-semester exams before the winter break

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when the information is fresh. More and better student learning does not appear to be the biggest attraction of the schedule change; instead, it is *appearance* of learning—higher test scores for comparable levels of learning—that seems to drive this change.

Meanwhile, in moves that very much will affect student learning—and eventually test scores—LAUSD laid off almost 1,000 classified employees—librarians, clerks, custodians, cafeteria workers and more. Another 3,700 were transferred to other schools and other positions, many with less pay. These workers provide valuable services, support systems and help sustain a positive learning environment. “We’re losing the people who actually make the schools run properly with teachers,” a protesting teacher said.

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