



# THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

*Week of March 28-April 1, 2011*

## **Sensible Talk about Student Testing from the President**

by UCLA IDEA

This week at a town hall sponsored by Univision, a student from Bell Multicultural High School in Washington, D.C., asked President Obama why she had to take so many tests. Obama's surprising answer signaled that he has listened to the deep concerns about testing raised by communities, educators and education researchers.

Beginning with the Clinton administration and throughout "No Child Left Behind" from the Bush years, high-stakes standardized testing has been the keystone of federal school reform initiatives. Although evidence of the overuse and misuse of testing has been overwhelming, the current Department of Education has promoted test-driven school decisions and school-improvement policies.

But now, Obama seems to reveal a clearer understanding of the proper role for testing. Whether or when this understanding makes its way into school policy is not clear, but the president's words are encouraging. Obama said there was nothing wrong with administering tests to provide a baseline of where students were strong, weak and what areas need more attention from teachers.

He continued:

Too often what we've been doing is using these tests to punish students or to, in some cases, punish schools. And so what we've said is let's find a test that everybody agrees makes sense; let's apply it in a less pressure-packed atmosphere; let's figure out whether we have to do it every year or whether we can do it maybe every several years; and let's make sure that that's not the only way we're judging whether a school is doing well.

For many years, educators and researchers have mounted evidence that should guide testing policies: Formative assessments should be created by teachers. Testing can be useful to diagnose students' strengths and weaknesses. Tests are just one tool out of many that can be used to determine success. And there's a danger when the stakes surrounding tests are too high.

High-stakes and high-pressure tests such as those that determine students' future opportunities are likely to be unfair and counterproductive, especially when schools don't have the resources or mission to act helpfully on information that the tests reveal. In past years, students have borne the weight of tests' limitations and errors. More recently, teachers have been subjected to the testing culture as districts and states seek to adopt tenure and layoff rules that include students' test results.

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A recent spate of media attention has focused on test-taking irregularities. For example, in Washington, D.C., allegations have arisen of test cheating at schools that were under the helm of test-promoting Michelle Rhee. During her tenure as chancellor, Rhee doled out bonuses to teachers and principals who raised them and fired those who didn't.

We hope that the president's comments this week represent a real shift in administration policies. His new, more balanced position should inform the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (what is now No Child Left Behind). Easing testing's punitive aspects can open the way to using tests to inform teaching and to distribute resources how and where they are needed most.

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