

States' Standards, Tests Are a Mismatch, Study Finds

By Bess Keller

Half of the more than 800 high-stakes state tests given to satisfy the No Child Left Behind Act don't appear to line up with the states' academic standards, raising basic questions about using such assessments to judge schools, students, or teachers, argues a report released today by the American Federation of Teachers.

The policy brief was released by the 1.3 million-member union July 20 at the start of its biennial convention in Boston.

One aspect of the problem, the report says, is the quality of the standards themselves. Another is the mismatch between states' expectations for students—the academic standards—and the content of the tests. For a state's NCLB-mandated testing regime to qualify as “smart,” the standards had to be clear and explicit, and the tests had to sample proportionately from them, according to the paper.

Only 11 states met the union's criteria for strong standards and tests that “align” with them, it says, and 20 states “have much work to do”—beefing up their standards, matching up tests with standards, or showing what they have done online.

“The systems in those states aren't smart enough yet to bear the weight of the accountability functions they are asked to serve,” said Antonia Cortese, the AFT's executive vice president. As one example of such a function, she cited the “in need of improvement”

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Executive Vice President
American Federation of Teachers

label applied to schools if they don't meet measures of adequate yearly progress, or AYP. The label triggers a series of consequences for the schools.

Ms. Cortese said teachers frequently expressed frustration over tests that didn't seem to be closely drawn from state academic standards in recent union-sponsored “town hall” meetings on the federal law. The meetings, held so far in five cities, are part of the AFT's bid to stir its members to fight for changes in the 4½-year-old law, which is due for congressional reauthorization in 2007.

Activism around the law is expected to be one strand of the rank-and-file involvement that union leaders will be pushing at the July 20-23 gathering, just three months before federal elections that Democratic Party strategists and their allies in the labor movement hope will weaken the Republican grip on Congress. More than 3,500 delegates are registered, most from the nation's cities, which have been AFT and Democratic strongholds.

AFT Says Many States Have Improved Content Standards

Making the Connection

Based on an analysis by the American Federation of Teachers, 11 states now have all their math, reading, and science tests aligned to strong content standards. Other states are progressing at different speeds.

Percent of state tests aligned to strong content standards.

100%	75-99%	50-74%	25-49%	1-25%	0%
California Indiana* Louisiana Nevada New Mexico* New York Ohio Tennessee Virginia Washington West Virginia	Alaska Arizona Mississippi Oklahoma* Oregon	Alabama Florida Georgia Kansas Kentucky Maryland Massachusetts Minnesota New Hampshire New Jersey Pennsylvania Rhode Island South Dakota Texas Utah	Idaho Michigan Nebraska North Carolina Vermont	Colorado Illinois Maine Missouri South Carolina Wisconsin	Arkansas Connecticut Delaware District of Columbia Hawaii Iowa Montana North Dakota Wyoming

*Not yet testing in science at high school level. **SOURCE: American Federation of Teachers**

Reading Standards Weak

In their study, the AFT researchers looked for standards to be clear, explicit by grade level, and rooted in the knowledge and skills for the particular subject, as well as accessible on the Web. Similarly, documentation of the relationship between the standards and the tests had to be available online.

The researchers contend that such “transparency” helps teachers do their jobs and builds trust in the system among educators and the public.

The union, which from 1995 to 2001 published an annual report evaluating states’ academic standards, found significant progress on that front. The standards that relate to NCLB testing are more specific and more often set out by grade levels—a help to teachers and test-makers—than the across-the-board standards examined five years ago, the report says. The progress is particularly noteworthy because of the pressure on state education departments to respond quickly to the sweeping federal law’s mandates, which include annual tests in reading and mathematics in grades 3-8 and once in high school and, starting next year, three tests of science spread across grade levels.

More than one-third of states have standards the union deemed “strong” for every grade and subject tested under the No Child Left Behind law, and just under three-quarters of the academic standards related to those tests across the states qualified.

When the criteria for “aligned” tests are considered along with those for strong standards, the picture dims. Only 52 percent of the 833 tests states give to meet NCLB requirements reflect strong standards, the report says. Twenty-six states have aligned math tests; just half that many have aligned reading tests, based on the AFT’s reading of the evidence.

Those figures, though, should not be the final judgment, said Matthew Gandal, the executive vice president of Achieve. The Washington-based group, founded by state governors and business leaders to promote standards and accountability in education, has reviewed state tests in about 20 states. “To make ultimate claims of alignment, you’ve got to look at the tests themselves,” a more time-consuming and complicated process than the one the AFT pursued, Mr. Gandal said.

Despite the less-than-perfect methodology, Mr. Gandal, who as an employee of the union helped start its standards evaluations, praised it for “stepping out on this issue in a constructive way.”

The paper recommends that states move quickly to shore up their reading standards, which were weak in a number of states, and improve their high school standards, which too often are not pinpointed to grades or courses. The researchers also urge state education officials to make more up-to-date information available on their Web sites.

Finally, they call on Congress to give state education departments more money to improve their tests.

Edweek.org: A link to “Smart Testing: Let’s Get It Right” is online at www.edweek.org/links.

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