

Nevada Public Education News

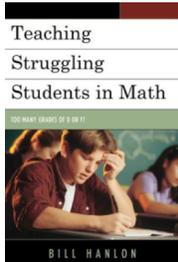


Statewide System of Testing

Bill Hanlon

Not all tests are created equal. Nor do all tests measure student performance equally.

Misguided decisions that emphasize short-term gains often lead to long-term losses. Just how many times do we have to experience that before we get it? What we in education seem to excel in is the race to the start line. It seems like policymakers and the educational leaders jump on the latest fad because they want to be on the proverbial “cutting” edge. It would be nice if we concentrated on the finish line and understood a simple axiom; what works is work!



Prior to the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), there was a statewide system of testing. That is, classroom teachers’ unit or chapter tests were much broader and deeper than district-wide tests. That was true because districts would only test two to three times per year with tests that had 50 to 60 questions. Teachers had the opportunity to monitor student learning by administering a number of assessments during the year, typically 12 tests plus other forms of quizzes, projects and assignments. In other words, teacher assessments were given more frequently with more in-depth information that could be used to better help determine where students need help – now called formative assessments.

State exams could not be as broad or as deep as local school districts’ exams because they typically administered only one exam per year with limited number of questions, sometimes covering work over multiple years. The questions asked on those tests were typically very general in nature and are used most frequently, no matter what people say, to compare schools’ performance. There also national type tests, like the college entrance exams.

The fact was, there was a system of testing, from national to state, district and teacher-constructed, with the teacher-made test being the broadest and deepest of them all because more questions could be tested that would give us a much clearer picture of student performance.

In math, we’d like tests to measure what students know, recognize, understand and are able to do. For instance, in primary grades, we teach students to skip count; 5, 10, 15, 20, ..., later in high school they learn about arithmetic progressions. To increase students understanding and make them feel more comfortable, it would be nice if teachers would have introduced arithmetic

progressions in algebra by reviewing and reinforcing skip counting – making that link increases student understanding.

By middle school students are taught the Pythagorean Theorem. It would be better for student understanding if the Distance Formula, Equation of a Circle or the trig identity $\cos^2x + \sin^2x = 1$ were introduced by the Pythagorean Theorem as they progressed through school since they are all the same formula, just written differently because they are being used in a different context.

Instruction should “link” the concepts and skills being taught in school to increase student understanding and performance. Making those links also provided teachers an opportunity to review and reinforce previously learned topics. And, if it is important enough to be taught, it should be important enough to test.

There is something to be said about doing things right the first time around. Short-term gains too often result in long-term losses. I think that can be said with respect to education’s response to the now, not so highly touted, NCLB Act which took the meat out of math instruction because important concepts and skills were not being tested.

To be seen as successful, one often has to know they are in a game, they must know the rules of the game, and how to manipulate those rules to win or be seen as a winner. Many superintendents, school administrators, and teachers knew that the game and the rules were changing under NCLB. Too many made adjustments in their game plan that were not in the best interest of the students they were serving.

Prior to the NCLB, high-stakes testing typically only affected high school students in terms of graduation, college entrance and financial aid. Scores were often reported by the media, but not much else. Educators quickly realized with the NCLB, there would be consequences. Those consequences led to some substantial changes in classroom assessments which resulted in changes in classroom instruction.

With the NCLB, each state set their own bar with the understanding that the bar would be raised each year – based on increasing the percentage of students passing high-stakes tests. Some states started with setting the bar very low and increasing in small increments with a big jump expected at the end. Other states set the bar at more reasonable rates and increased them more moderately so there would not be a great jump needed at the end. In other words – game on. The problem, there were 50 games and nobody really knew how everyone was doing compared to themselves.

Just trying to figure out how states and local school districts determined graduation rates became a farce.

The downside of the gamesmanship came with testing. As a believer that testing drives instruction, this became a problem and resulted in students not getting a full, rich, and rigorous curriculum.

Because the testing became so high-stakes under NCLB, school district’s created practice exams to look a lot like the state exams that determined if schools made adequate yearly progress

(AYP). Because there was such great concern in making AYP, teachers were encouraged/forced to test students on the material that was on the district exams, which mirrored the state exams.

Putting it simply, district exams looked more like state exams and teachers were being pressured to teach what was being tested on a state exam and not the content of the subject they were teaching. As teachers of math, we knew it was important to develop concepts for understanding. We knew that it wasn't a matter of "if" students would forget information over time, it was a matter of "when" they would forget it. Knowing that, it was important to teach students the "why" behind the math so when they forgot something, they would have a reasonable chance of reconstructing that knowledge. Math teachers also knew it was important at students could read, write and speak mathematics, but that kind of information was not tested on state exams, thus less, if any time, was spent teaching it.

Math teachers knew it was important for students to know definitions, notation, formulas, and procedures to be successful in math, but those were not tested on state exams either. Teachers also knew it was important for students to see how concepts and skills were linked together to create a better understanding and appreciation of mathematics – but that was not tested on state exams either.

In other words, if the way to win the game was to make AYP, then that is what districts, school administrators and teachers did to win the game. That is, they taught to a very narrow test. That short-term gain for schools was students' long-term loss. A statewide system of testing disappeared. The teacher, district and state tests mirrored each other.

And what we have seen from this failure in testing is that not all tests are created equally nor do measure student performance the same way that truly informs the public about the performance of public schools.

We will see very shortly what the new common core exams do.