MOVING BEYOND MINIMAL COMPETENCY TESTING

Speaker: Tom Fisher, Florida Department of Education
Instructor/Recorder: Dianne Wilkes, The Florida State University

Tom Fisher opened the session with a brief history of student assessment in Florida dating back to the Educational Accountability Act of 1976. Enacted in response to state-wide concern over declining performance levels of Florida public school students, the Educational Accountability Act mandated a state-wide program of student assessment to ensure that instructional objectives would be met throughout students' public education.

First implemented in 1977, the State Student Assessment Test, Part I, a multiple-choice census test, evaluates students' performance in basic communications and mathematics skills at grade levels 3, 5, 8, and 10. Students who do not achieve acceptable performance levels receive remedial instruction until they demonstrate mastery of the skills, as certified by their teachers. The State Student Assessment Test, Part II, which functions as a high school exit exam, also measures communications and mathematics skills. To pass this exam, students must demonstrate mastery of one half of the skills and correctly answer 70% of the items. According to the Florida Department of Education statistics, 78% of the students taking the mathematics component of the test pass on their first attempt, while 95% pass the communications section.

After five administrations of the test, 96.5% of the students pass both sections. Department of Education records also indicate a dramatic increase in minority students' performance since the test was first administered.

Fisher emphasized that, other than the problems inherent in administering and maintaining security on a state-wide test, the most difficult aspect of the testing program has been designing a test which can withstand the scrutiny of both the public and the courts—hence, the name change from "Functional Literacy Test" to "Statewide Student Assessment Test, Part II." The creation of numerous committees to oversee the construction of the tests, the modification of percent scoring to table scoring, and the decision to begin testing in the tenth rather than eleventh grade to give students five opportunities to pass the test. Despite the safeguards, the SSAT-III has been the subject of three lawsuits, the most famous being the Burlington v. Debra P. case, all of which the State has successfully defended.

Addressing Florida's efforts to reach the upper national quartile in student performance, Fisher described the standards of Excellence testing program, which is currently being designed by the Department of Education. To measure student competencies, the Standards of Excellence Test will evaluate performance in social studies, science, writing, and mathematics. At present, the Department of Education is considering the question of skills clarification, the method of selecting students to take the test, assessment strategies, grading procedures, and scoring. Pilot testing of the Standards of Excellence Test is planned for the 1984-85 school year, with field testing scheduled for 1986.

Fisher concluded the session by answering questions from the audience on the costs of the assessment programs.

THE POLITICS OF TESTING: THE FLORIDA EXPERIENCE

Hon. Ralph D. Turlington, Florida Commissioner of Education
John Simmons, The Florida State University
Sue Johnson, The Florida State University

Moderators/Recorders

Commissioner Turlington opened the session by describing the history of testing in Florida and the legislation that has created a dozen statewide tests over the past decade. He discussed the Basic Skills Assessment Program that assesses students' skills in the third, fifth, eighth, and eleventh grades, and the evolution of the 1979 Florida law mandating functional literacy as a requirement for high school graduation. He also discussed the recent court challenges to the state's functional literacy assessment program.

According to Commissioner Turlington, the testing program implemented in Florida has been received positively by teachers. It has caused schools to be more serious about their mission by giving teachers something to "hold over" students so that better performance is achieved. The testing program in Florida has provided a strong incentive and been an excellent motivator for improvement in schools.

Senator Gordon addressed the issue of the context of testing at the opening of his speech. He referred to education and testing in terms of the industrial model the state is responsible for the evaluation of a product, the student. The accountability for education rests in the hands of the students. School curricula are heavily weighted in a vocational direction, according to Gordon. Schools are in the business of training students for future jobs.

Senator Gordon believes that legislators and administrators should tell the public in simple, concise terms what is going on in the schools and they should be able to answer the question, "Are taxpayers getting their money's worth?" Testing accomplishes this goal. It is, according to Gordon, a "political necessity."

Gordon explained legislation that he introduced in the Florida Senate to increase support for teachers of English in the area of writing skills. The "Gordon Rule" provides for the reduction of class loads for secondary English teachers, provided these teachers agree to require one writing assignment per week. "Increased writing equals better writing" is the theoretical basis for this legislation.

In the question and answer session following the presentations, participants asked specific questions related to the testing of writing skills, particularly about the issue of increased funding from the legislature to implement such legislation as the "Gordon Rule." Senator Gordon recommended that teachers become involved in policy making in the school systems by attending budget sessions held by schools boards. In this way, teachers can have an impact on the types of testing done, and the types of support that are developed for the implementation of that testing.