

## School Tests: Assessment or Assault ?

By

Jack D. Forbes

Testing is always a relational concept: what are you going to test for; what content has been presented and what do you expect students to reproduce for the test; what is not going to be tested for; what is the significance of the difference between what is included and what is to be untested for. Standardized short-answer, multiple choice type tests can only test for certain kinds of knowledge. They also cannot be used to test for that which has not been taught, if we wish to measure in-school learning.

Surprisingly, however, all of the discussion of testing by California's two recent governors and by the legislature seems to revolve around how often to test and how to use test results, not about the all-important, crucial question of what content is to be tested. The content, it seems, is assumed. But what is it that is assumed? It is assumed that the content is somehow a fixed matter. That it does not vary from district to district, from school to school, from classroom to classroom.

But what is this fixed content, this assumed content? And we should remember that many standardized tests are basically or actually "national," which means that the entire country is supposed to be teaching the very same content (at least that which can be measured in the testing process). This fixed content, which is unexamined by our politicians, is the truly significant part of the testing situation. But some one must examine it, because someone has to decide what is to be taught in every school so that every school can be compared with every other school.

If we didn't have statewide or country-wide standardized tests, we could allow each region, each unique area, to develop its own content, content relevant to the culture, economy, and heritage of that region; but with standardized testing we cannot do that. Thus, as pointed out, these tests represent a form of collectivization from above, a form of command system reminiscent of the Soviet Union or other centralized state systems. With this difference, however, and that is that the late USSR allowed regions and ethnic areas within the society to develop culturally-relevant educational programs using local languages, as well as Russian. That is something that we do not see in the State of California now, especially since bilingualism has been dealt a serious blow with the apparent abolition of bilingual education programs.

For content we must look to the "standards" in history and social science adopted by Pete Wilson's State Board of Education in late 1998. These standards, which are biased in favor of white males of English heritage, are also dominated by an "east coast" perspective which is downright hostile to our western North American geological, physiographic, cultural, ethnic, and historical realities and legacies.

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