

INTRODUCTION

Testing as an indicator of educational attainment is a characteristic of the American educational system. While there are many questions surrounding the use of tests for various purposes, when American public policy turns periodically to focus on public education, tests tend to increase. We are currently in such a period.

To give an indication of the present level of activity, OTA has compiled information that offers two approaches to understanding the current climate for testing. First, OTA supported a survey of the states to identify the extent of two types of testing now in wide use — testing for assessment purposes and tests to determine minimum competency. The survey data was compiled by the Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory in 1985. Second, eight states were selected, and people active in testing were asked to describe, in their own words, the forces behind increased testing, and some of the results of those forces.

Thus, this document offers two ways to observe trends. A large number of states have incorporated minimum competency testing into their requirements, either for passage into a higher grade or for graduation from high school. The object of this testing is to establish certain standards of learning that should be mastered by all students and to ensure that objective criteria are used to measure basic achievement. A related effect is to influence curriculum through specifying certain material that by definition must be covered. Testing for assessment, a less familiar term, has come into use as a method for understanding comparative achievement by groups of students, and by schools or school districts. Assessment testing is considered to be more insightful and give more useful information to educators than comparison based simply on traditional achievement tests.

As in any study of American education, aggregate data cover a wide variety of different circumstances. Most decisions on testing are still made at the level of the states or the school district. Increasingly, however, decisions are shifting to the state level. This trend is consonant with increased belief by state legislatures and citizens that a broad responsibility for producing well educated citizens requires state-level action. This trend is often coupled with increasing interest in competitiveness and a related belief that a state cannot do well in attracting employment without a strong educational base. Many of the state "vignettes" reveal this philosophy.

Examination of the state vignettes, the explanatory notes on testing data, and the raw data, will provide a snapshot of a certain type of testing in wide use in the mid-1980s. As with any survey data, exact numbers of figures, particularly dollar amounts, are difficult to compare across states. The tables should be read as general indicators of trends.