

STATEWIDE TESTING IN NEW JERSEY

Steven Koffler

*Prepared Under Contract With
the Office of Technology Assessment
Congress of the United States*

Statewide Testing in New Jersey

The focus of statewide testing in New Jersey has changed three times since 1972 to meet the changing demands of society. During the past fourteen years, the program has changed from statewide assessment (1972-1977) to minimum competency testing (1978-1985) to the current more rigorous competency testing (1984 -). The purpose of this paper is to explain the changes in statewide testing in New Jersey, with particular emphasis on the rationale for the different programs, the components of each program and the curricular and policy implications of each.

Educational Assessment Program

Statewide testing in New Jersey began with the first administration of the Educational Assessment Program (EAP) tests in 1972. The EAP measured reading and mathematics skills which had been identified as being taught in a majority of the public school classrooms in New Jersey. Students in grades four, seven and ten were tested annually; students in grade twelve were tested every three years.

The impetus for the EAP came from New Jersey Governor William Cahill who, in his 1972 State of the State address, lamented that there was no 'reliable scientific test on a statewide basis to determine reading ability and reading growth of our youth.' A bill to create a statewide assessment program died in the legislature; however because New Jersey statutes provide the Commissioner of Education with the power to create such programs, Commissioner Carl Marburger ordered that a statewide assessment program be developed.

The primary purpose of the EAP was to assist districts to identify programmatic needs and provide direction for program design, improvement and evaluation. Results were returned to the districts in the form of item-by-item summary reports. Those

reports identified the percent of students correctly responding to each item for every class, building and district. Districts were required to analyze and make public the test results. However, the districts only had to do so for the subset of items which in their judgment measured the skills which had been taught prior to the test's administration.

No total or other aggregated scores were reported at any level. As a result, the EAP results had little effect on policy. The test results also did not affect students or schools. The EAP was intended for statewide and district assessment, not for measuring individuals' or groups' competency. The EAP monitored the education system and measured the status quo. It served a limited, but important, role: focusing on the districts' curricular needs and monitoring the changes in the needs.

Minimum Basic Skills Program

By the mid 1970's, the continuing trend of declining test scores and increasing costs for education led to the loss of public confidence in the professional educators' ability to resolve the problems of education. This loss of confidence led to the public's decision that external forces had to impose and raise standards in the schools. And, testing was to play a prominent role in that decision.

Statewide assessment programs, like the EAP, were considered insufficient to satisfy the public's new demand. Instead of tests which provided information about the status of the education system, the public wanted a program which would serve as a catalyst to cause the system to change. As a result, minimum competency testing programs were initiated in state after state.

A 1976 New Jersey law resulted in the end of the EAP and the creation of the Minimum Basic Skills (MBS) test, a statewide minimum competency program designed to measure pupils' proficiency in minimum reading and mathematics skills at grades 3, 6, 9 and 11. The skills to be measured by the MBS were identified based on input from educators, students and the general public and were those which students needed to

master at a minimum by spring of the tested grades. The tests were criterion-referenced tests developed by the Department.

In spring 1978, the MBS tests were administered for the first time. Approximately 21% of the students failed at least one of those tests that year. In one urban area approximately 84% of the students failed the sixth grade mathematics test and 81% failed the ninth grade mathematics test. In 1978 many students, especially in the urban areas, did not have a mastery of those skills considered to be minimum and basic.

By 1982 there were dramatic improvements in student performance. By that spring, only 9% of the students were failing; there was substantial improvement, especially in the urban areas. The improvement was both expected and logical. After five years, school curriculums had been modified to reflect the tested skills, the teaching staff was teaching the skills, and, as the results indicate, students were learning the skills.

While the EAP program assumed a passive, monitoring role, the MBS served an active role in changing the education system. This difference in roles is exemplified by the manner in which the results were reported to the public. The EAP reporting was left to the districts and was on an item by item basis for selected items. The MBS reporting took on new and more important meaning because district by district aggregated results (i.e., percent passing) based on all of the items were reported to the public by the Department. Districts could be compared and the public sought answers as to why their district's students were not performing at the same level as students elsewhere. The public's demand provided the pressure that contributed to the teaching of the MBS skills.

While the EAP's effect upon the districts' curriculum was negligible, the MBS's effect was far reaching. The EAP skills were included in the districts' curriculums; however, MBS skills were not necessarily part of it. Total scores and public reporting were based on all of the items. Thus, teaching had to reflect all of the skills. Certainly, districts did not have to alter their programs so that sufficient instruction in the tested

skills occurred prior to the testing dates. Yet, if they did not, their students' performance might be lower than those of neighboring districts. In this manner, the tests dictated a portion of each district's curriculum and the impetus for curricular change shifted to the Department of Education.

The MBS also became a critical factor in shaping many areas of educational policy. Unlike the EAP, sanctions were now i reposed as a result of the test. The MBS results influenced high school graduation policies and became a method of identifying students who needed remediation and a mechanism for distributing funds, certifying districts and evaluating teachers. As a result, there was even greater pressure to improve performance.

In summary, because its results affected and effected policy and were reported publicly each year, the MBS became a catalyst that changed education in New Jersey. The MBS was a successful program; students in New Jersey mastered the minimum skills. Yet, the program's success caused its demise — and properly so.

High School Proficiency Test

The MBS was a key issue in the 1981 New Jersey gubernatorial election. The Republican candidate, former state Assemblyman Thomas Kean, was the author of the 1976 MBS law. However, by 1981 he believed that the state's focus on minimum skills was too narrow. Kean was elected and appointed Saul Cooperman, a New Jersey district superintendent, as his Corn missioner of Education.

Cooperman agreed that the MBS had to be eliminated. He concluded that the education system had moved beyond the minimums because students had mastered the minimums. Most students were not only passing the test, but most were correctly answering almost all of the items. Further, because the MBS focused on minimum skills, it could not identify deficiencies in higher level cognitive skills — and the need to measure the higher level skills was becoming increasingly evident.

A 1979 law mandated statewide graduation requirements, including passing the ninth grade statewide test, beginning with the ninth grade class of 1981-82. Cooperman believed that a 'cruel hoax was being perpetrated on the students' because although they could be awarded a diploma by passing the MBS, many of them did not have the skills which would prepare them for the work force or college.

Cooperman was convinced that higher standards were necessary and that the state's graduation test had to reflect the level of skills and difficulty that was needed by ninth graders in order to become 'productive members of society'. He believed that since students had mastered the minimum basic skills, it was the proper time to take the next step and require a mastery of a set of higher level skills.

In August 1982, Cooperman recommended to the State Board of Education that the MBS program be eliminated and that it be replaced by a new statewide testing system which would better reflect the current needs of students in the state. Cooper man indicated that he would recommend the components of the new program in January 1983.

There were eight principles which Cooperman decided must be satisfied by the new statewide testing system.

- 1. The new tests had to provide a measure of accountability which would restore public confidence in education.*
- 2. The new testing system had to be fiscally economical and relatively independent of funding fluctuations.*
- 3. The new tests had to be more rigorous than the MBS and emphasize more than just minimum basic skills.*

4. Tests were needed in the elementary grades as an Early Warning System to insure that students were mastering the prerequisite skills they needed to pass the graduation test.
5. The new system had to avoid or minimize duplicative or overtesting. Thus, the tests used had to be as efficient as possible and serve state and local purposes, where appropriate.
6. The tests had to satisfy rigorous professional standards.
7. The new system had to satisfy New Jersey law which required that the Department of Education establish 'uniform proficiency standards' in the basic skills. It also required a test for high school graduation to be initially administered to students in the ninth grade.
8. The new system had to satisfy the Debra P. v. Burlington judicial decisions which required that:
 - a. graduation tests had to reflect the material taught;
 - b. students had to be provided fair warning and opportunity to prepare for a graduation test.

In January 1983, Coaperman recommended to the State Board of Education the components of the new statewide testing system. Many alternatives had been considered including the use of commercially-developed normed-referenced tests, state-developed criterion-referenced tests, and combinations of the two. The recommended program

included a state developed ninth grade graduation test, called the High School Proficiency Test (HSPT). The HSPT would consist of reading, mathematics and writing criterion-referenced tests and would be designed to measure a higher level set of skills than did the MBS.

There would be no state-developed tests in other grades. Rather, districts would continue to be required to select and use in grades 3-11 the test which was most appropriate for their curriculum and satisfied technical criteria established by the Department. The Department would identify specific passing scores for each commercial test and would annually collect and make public each district's test results (percent passing) in grades three and six.

The use of both a state-developed test in grade nine and commercially-developed tests at all other grades had many persuasive advantages and best met the established principles. The advantage of the commercial tests were as follows:

- 1. The tests districts chose would best match their curricula.*
- 2. Commercial tests measure higher level skills than the MBS test and can be administered at every grade level, providing for a continuous assessment of student progress.*
- 3. Commercial tests allow districts to compare their students' performance with that of students at the national level.*
- 4. The use of commercial tests avoids overtesting or duplicative testing. It also reduces costs to the state without increasing costs to the districts.*

5. *In 1978 when the MBS program began, state-developed tests were needed at multiple grade levels because many districts did not have sophisticated testing programs which could be relied upon to provide valid and reliable data. Today, however, local programs do provide such information.*

While the arguments for using commercial tests in the elementary grades were persuasive, there were equally compelling arguments for using a state-developed test for grade nine. The major factor was the high school graduation law. It would be unfair to permit students to take different graduation tests because they attended different schools.

Many wanted the HSPT to immediately replace the MBS as the graduation requirement. However, the 'due notice' decision from the Debra P. v. Burlington case required that before a test was used to deny students a diploma, there had to be sufficient time for the students to be taught the skills. Because of this, Commissioner Cooperman and the State Board of Education agreed that although the HSPT would be administered beginning in 1983-84, it would not count for graduation until the 1985-86 administration. Thus, during school years 1983-84 and 1984-85, the MBS and HSPT were administered to all ninth grade students.

The major distinction between the MBS and the HSPT was in the skills measured by each. While the MBS measured rote learning, the HSPT measures skills students need to interpret what they read, solve practical math problems and write coherently. By contrast, the MBS reading test stressed literal comprehension while the HSPT measures inferential comprehension. The MBS math test required simple computation and one-step word problems while the HSPT math test requires students to respond to three- and four-step word problems, prealgebra and geometry. While there was no writing component to the MBS, there is one for the HSPT. The writing component of the HSPT consists of both a multiple choice section and, more importantly, an essay.

At the December 1985 State Board of Education meeting, Commissioner Cooperman recommended to the Board passing scores for the HSPT. More important than the actual passing scores are the anticipated i replications of the scores. In 1986, approximately 86,500 students will take the HSPT. It is estimated that about 42,000 students (48.5%) will fail at least one part of the test. However, as with the MBS test, students have four opportunities to pass the HSPT (in grades 9-12). It is expected that each year as the districts' curricula become more aligned with the HSPT-tested skills, the percent of students passing the tests will dramatically increase.

Considerable effort is now being directed to prepare students for the HSPT both at the state and district levels. As part of its HSPT initiative, the Department did not stop with developing a new, more rigorous statewide testing system. Rather, the Department went beyond its traditional regulating role and is now working with districts to develop and offer new programs to help prepare students for the HSPT. The Department has developed a variety of programs, training institutes, resource guides, pilot programs, demonstration projects, model programs and instructional materials for districts directed toward helping students improve their basic skills measured by the HSPT. Further, it has developed programs to improve student attendance, strengthen job training programs, discourage students from dropping out and offer alternatives to those who do drop out and reduce disruption in the classroom. Approximately \$13 million has been committed for this effort, one of the largest of its kind in the country.

Although virtually no organization opposes the movement toward higher standards, certain groups are opposed to various aspects or implications of the program. The statewide organizations representing the principals and supervisors, school boards and teachers have expressed concern about the effect the program will have on dropouts, the need for increased funds for compensatory education programs, and the length of the 'due notice' period. The following points are pertinent to those concerns:

1. *That the test will lead to an increased high school dropout rate is speculative and not supported by the MBS experience. The state's dropout rate remained stable during the MBS years.*
2. *Students who fail tests at all grade levels (MBS, HSPT, commercial test) are to be provided with compensatory education programs. In 1985-86, the Department is providing districts \$106 million in state compensatory education aid for remedial programs. In 1986-87, the total is expected to exceed \$110 million. The Commissioner has requested an additional \$49 million, for a total of \$159 million, to address the increased needs anticipated during the transition from MBS to HSPT.*
3. *The organizations did not favor postponing the HSPT; rather they wanted to gradually increase the passing scores, arguing that there has not been sufficient time for the students to have been taught the skills. However, districts and students have now had a two and a half year preparation time before the first meaningful administration of the HSPT, and a six year delay before the test would affect the first graduating class (1988-89). Further, to lower the passing score from the recommended levels would serve to graduate students who were not as prepared as they should be.*

it is clear that the HSPT will parallel the MBS as a catalyst to reform education in New Jersey. It will be used for essentially the same policy and curricular purposes as was the MBS. However, the impact of the HSPT may be even greater than the MBS because of its increased rigor.

Conclusion

The concept of statewide testing changed significantly in New Jersey as the demands of the public changed. It is clear that the public is convinced that statewide competency programs are a legitimate means of effecting reform. Their confidence is apparent by the support for the movement in New Jersey toward a more rigorous form of program rather than an abandoning of statewide testing. Finally, even though the HSPT is still in its initial stages of implementation, plans are already being developed to someday replace the HSPT with a new graduation test at the eleventh rather than the ninth grade level. Thus, it is likely, at least in New Jersey, that statewide competency testing will continue to be an important component of the education system for many years.

REFERENCES

- Cahill, W.T., Governor's Message to New Jersey State Legislature, January 1972. (Trenton, NJ, 1972).*
- Cooperman, S., High School Proficient Test Information Packet, (New Jersey Department of Education, Trenton, NJ, 1985).*
- Debra P. et. al. v. Burlington, 644 F. Supp. 2d 397, 400-02 (5th Cir. 1981).*
- Koffler, S. L., Statewide Testing Programs: From Monitors of Change to Tools of Reform, (Paper presented at the 1984 annual meeting of the National Council of Measurement in Education, New Orleans, LA, 1984).*
- New Jersey State Department of Education Guidelines for the Interpretation of the New Jersey Educational Assessment Program Results 1972-73, (Trenton, NJ, 1973).*
- New Jersey State Department of Education, Statewide Testing System, (Trenton, NJ, 1983).*