

A BRIEF HISTORY OF STATE TESTING POLICIES IN COLORADO

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BACKGROUND

To better understand Colorado's policies toward state testing, some general background information about Colorado's public education system is needed.

Colorado is a strong local control" state. This is especially true in the area of education. For example, Colorado has no state curriculum or curricular objectives. The 176 local school boards each determine the curriculum to be used in their individual school districts. The concept of local control has generally had support from the public, local district staff and school board members, the Colorado General Assembly, the Colorado State Board of Education, the Commissioner of Education, and the Department of Education.

The need for local control is also supported by the diversity that exists within the state. The majority of Colorado school districts are located in rural mountainous or agricultural settings while the majority of students (78%) attend urban or suburban school districts. The imposition of strong state control in the area of education appears to be neither practical nor desirable in Colorado.

The State of Colorado guarantees that each school district will receive a certain amount of funds to educate its students. This is accomplished through the annual establishment of an Authorized Revenue Base (ARB) by the state legislature. The ARB is the dollar amount per pupil that represents the district's level of support for equalization purposes. The minimum ARB for 1985 was \$2,550, triple the ARB for 1975.

The revenue for the allowed ARB is generated through a shared formula using local school district property taxes and the state general fund. The shared formula includes a guaranteed tax base method (i.e., every mill of tax is guaranteed to raise an amount of revenue per pupil) to ensure equalization. Between 1975 and 1985, the guaranteed tax base increased from \$27 to \$63.41 per pupil. The state share of the ARB has changed

relatively little between 1975 and 1985; the state general fund provides approximately half of the ARB each year.

Governor Richard D. Lamm was a strong proponent of educational reform, serving on several different national task forces dealing with public education. Governor Lamm also worked with a legislature controlled by the opposition party since his initial election in 1974. Beginning with the 1985 legislative session, the Governor faced with a veto-proof Colorado General Assembly.

In November 1986, State Treasurer Roy Romer was elected to succeed Governor Lamm. During the campaign and since taking office, Governor Romer has stressed the importance of education — elementary, secondary, and postsecondary — in building for Colorado's economic future. Like Lamm, he must work with a "veto-proof" legislature controlled by the opposition party.

It is against this background that the past and current state testing policies must be considered.

COLORADO POLICIES, 1970-1985

During this time period, there were no mandatory state testing programs. Given the general support for local control of schools, other alternatives were pursued by the Colorado General Assembly. The first alternative was the Educational Accountability Act of 1971. This represented Colorado's response to the assessment/testing programs being set up by other states during the early 1970s to institute accountability measures.

The Educational Accountability Act of 1971 established the State Accountability Committee, which is an advisory body for the State Board of Education, and mandated the creation of local accountability committees within each school district. The purposes of the legislation are as follows:

22-7-102. Legislative declaration. (1) The general assembly declares that the purpose of this article is to institute an accountability program to define and measure quality in education and thus to help the public schools of Colorado to

achieve such quality and to expand the life opportunities and options of the students of this state; further, the purpose is to provide to local school boards assistance in helping their school patrons to determine the relative value of their school program as compared to its cost.

(2) The general assembly further declares that the educational accountability program developed under this article should be designed to measure objectively the adequacy and efficiency of the educational programs offered by the public schools. The program should begin by developing broad goals and specific performance objectives for the educational process and by identifying the activities of schools which can advance students toward these goals and objectives. The program should then develop a means for evaluating the achieve merits and performance of students. (Colorado Revised Statutes, 1985)

The Educational Accountability Act of 1971 is still in effect within Colorado. The Colorado State Board of Education has adopted rules and regulations to implement the law, and Colorado Department of Education staff verify that local districts are in compliance with the rules and regulations. Approximately one-third of the districts are reviewed each year for accountability and accreditation purposes.

During the mid-1970s, states across the country began to mandate minimum competency or proficiency testing programs through either legislative or state board of education action. The general purpose of such programs was to verify that all students possessed a certain core of skills and abilities before leaving the public education system. Because Colorado does not have a state curriculum or state curricular objectives, the Colorado General Assembly passed the following legislation, revising the duties of local boards of education, in 1975 to address the question of competency or proficiency testing.

22-32-109.5. Board of education — specific duties — testing requirements. (1) In carrying out its duties under section 22-32-109 (1) (t) in determining educational programs, if a board of education imposes any special proficiency test for graduation from the twelfth grade beyond the regular requirements for satisfactory completion of the courses and hours prescribed for graduation, the results of such tests shall be used by school districts to design regular or special classes to meet the needs of all children as indicated by overall test results. If a board determines to impose such a proficiency test, such test shall be given at least twice during each school year, and initial testing shall take place in the ninth grade.

(2) Any child who does not satisfactorily fulfill the requirements of a special proficiency test imposed under the provisions of subsection (1) of this section shall be provided with remedial or tutorial services during the school day in the subject area which the test indicates deficiencies for graduation purposes. Such child shall be provided with these services from the time of initial testing until such time as the results of the special proficiency test are satisfactory. Parents of children not satisfactorily fulfilling the requirements of a special proficiency test shall be provided with all special proficiency test scores for their child, a minimum of once each semester. (Colorado Revised Statutes, 1985)

This provision for proficiency testing is still in effect within the State of Colorado. The Denver Public School System has been the principal user of this legislation, though the school system has announced publicly its intention to move away from the use of proficiency testing for graduation purposes.

Nearly all Colorado school districts test students with a standardized achievement test battery during any given school year. Because of the requirement for the Commissioner of Education to report annually on the status of K-12 public education, the Colorado Department of Education has required school districts to report reading and mathematics scores from their standardized achievement testing program. The purpose of collecting the information was to be able to report on the achievement of Colorado students.

Unfortunately, the information has had limited utility because of the problems associated with aggregating the data. Because the districts use different test batteries, different forms of the same test battery, test different grades at different times of the year, and use different reporting metrics, the Department of Education has not been able to report more than the percentage of districts at, above, or below the expected test norm in reading and mathematics for elementary and secondary students.

LEGISLATIVE ACTIVITIES, 1985

Between the 1984 and 1985 legislative sessions, the Interim Committee on School Finance met to deal with a variety of issues facing public education as it entered the mid-1980s. Though the state's share of the ARB had remained relatively stable (approximately 50%) over the past ten years, the dollar amount continued to increase and accounted for more and more of the state general fund. Members of the Interim Committee began to raise questions about the quality of the public education offered in Colorado as they struggled with the issues of financing elementary, secondary, and higher education. Also, the recent national reports on public education and the need for reform, such as Nation At Risk, had raised a healthy skepticism among the public and the legislature about the current status of education. There was general agreement among the members of the Interim Committee that some statewide testing was needed.

During the 1985 legislative session, two major testing bills were introduced by House members. The first bill called for testing all public school students in grades 3, 6, and 9 using a standardized achievement test battery to be selected by the State Board of Education. In effect, the bill would have established an ongoing Colorado testing program with the Colorado State Board of Education having the option of annually selecting the standardized achievement test battery to be used to carry out the testing. The second bill called for all 12th grade students to pass a proficiency test covering, but not limited to, reading, language arts, and mathematics as a graduation requirement. This bill would have established a Colorado minimum competency testing program. Both bills generated a great deal of debate statewide and at the statehouse.

The testing program bill was generally opposed by the local education community. The principal arguments offered against the bill were as follows. Districts already test students using standardized achievement test batteries to gauge accomplishment of curricular goals and to improve instruction. The test batteries selected at the district level are considered to be the best measures of the curriculum taught. The addition of a

state program would result in a loss of instructional time for students. The state program might or might not measure what is being taught by the district, and would probably have limited utility at the district or teacher levels. The cost of a state program would be large and would represent a waste of limited resources. The ultimate arguments were that the imposition of a state testing program would result in a loss of local control, that the content of the achievement test battery would begin to dictate curriculum at the local level, and that a state testing program would lead to the establishment of a state curriculum.

Although concerned about the potential loss of local control and the specter of a state curriculum, the Colorado PTA was further concerned about whether a state testing program could be made meaningful for students and parents. An amendment was passed requiring that the results be reported to the student and his/her parents. Its main concern addressed, the Colorado PTA assumed a position of limited support for the testing program.

The main questions asked by local educators included what was the purpose of such a program and how would the results be used by the legislature. There was great concern that the results would be used to compare individual districts, buildings, or classrooms. There was also concern that the test results would somehow be used to adjust state support of individual school districts. The responses from the House Education Committee were that a statewide profile of student achievement was very desirable and that the results could possibly be used to support special funding of categorical education programs.

The 12th grade proficiency testing bill produced a great deal of emotion. There was general agreement by all segments of the education community with support from business and industry spokespersons that no student should leave school without a minimal core of skills. Strong supporters of the bill gave impassioned pleas that schools not be allowed to graduate students who lack the skills needed to become a productive

member of society. This appeal was based on both the subsequent effects upon the individual and the cost to society of supporting such individuals. Supporters also demanded that remediation be provided to all students who did not pass the test.

The education community argued that attempting to provide remediation in 12th grade might be too late, while expressing the fear that a testing program based on minimums might have the effect of lowering standards and expectations for all students. Concern about how such a program might establish a state curriculum also arose. The most effective argument offered against the bill was that it might end up penalizing the very students it was attempting to help and could result in encouraging such students to become dropouts.

After public testimony was accepted on the proficiency testing bill, the bill was amended by the House Education Committee. The amended bill required that all 11th grade students be required to take a proficiency test. The results of the test were to become part of the student's permanent record; the results were not to be used as a graduation requirement.

The Colorado State Board of Education expressed its support for the establishment of a statewide testing program, though the Board wished to see the testing program bill expanded to include students in grade 11. The Board generally felt that the information gained from statewide testing would be useful as it established its priorities for the work of the department. The State Board did not support the proficiency testing bill. After that bill was amended, the Board expressed its desire to see the bill broadened to test achievement rather than proficiency for students in grade 11. The State Board of Education also was very concerned that a proficiency test would allow minimums to become the goal for high school students.

The Commissioner of Education presented the Board's position to the House Education Committee. Department staff provided technical information to the Committee on the bills, possible amendments and/or alternatives, and the potential costs

of implementing proposed programs. The Commissioner also supported a third testing bill which was introduced in the Senate by the Chairman of the Senate Education Committee. This bill would have allowed the department to establish a statewide testing program without having the exact design mandated. The design of the program would have been based upon input from the education community with final approval of the design resting with the State Board of Education. Unfortunately, this was part of a larger bill which was aimed at reform of Colorado school finance. The General Assembly chose not to deal with the issue of financing education during its 1985 session.

Both of the House testing bills were passed by the House Education Committee and were forwarded to the Appropriations Committee after brief hearings by the Senate Education Committee. Colorado state law prohibits deficit spending by the state, and the General Assembly did not want to undertake any revenue raising programs during the 1985 session. As a result, the testing program bill did not leave the Appropriations Committee because of the large amount of new funding it would require. The proficiency test bill did leave the Appropriations Committee with a provision to conduct a feasibility study of the program for \$20,000; it was later defeated on the floor of the legislature. Although there was general grumbling and skepticism about the status of Colorado education, the General Assembly chose not to fund the testing bills or other education bills during the 1985 session.

At this point, the Colorado education community proposed to the legislature that it fund pilot programs in student testing and other education areas of expressed concern by transferring \$2 million of the state's support of local school districts to the Department of Education for the next two years. The intent of the coalition group, which included the Colorado Association of School Boards, the Colorado Association of School Executives, the Colorado Education Association, the Colorado Federation of Teachers, the Colorado Council of Deans of Education, the Colorado Parent and Teacher Association, the Colorado State Board of Education, and the Colorado Department of

Education, was to demonstrate that it could address a number of important education issues in this manner. The 2 + 2 concept, as it quickly became known, was endorsed by the Colorado Association for Commerce and Industry and the Office of the Governor.

The Chairman of the House Education Committee accepted the challenge of the education community and introduced House Bill 1383. Co-sponsored by the Speaker of the House, the President of the Senate, the Chairman of the Senate Education Committee and other key legislators in the General Assembly, the bill transferred \$2 million to the Department of Education for the next two years and required the department to conduct pilot programs in the following areas: student testing, dropout reduction, education of gifted and talented students, training of education staff evaluators, and teacher and administrator quality and training.

Percentages of the \$2 million were allocated to the areas in the bill, with student testing being allocated \$500,000 per year. House Bill 1383 was passed by the Colorado General Assembly in May. It has since become known as the Educational Quality Act of 1985.

COLORADO POLICIES, 1986 and 1987

The Educational Quality Act of 1985 specified that during the first year of student testing (1986) all public school students in grades 3, 6, 9, and 11 be tested with a standardized achievement test battery. This design reflects the two major testing bills introduced in the House and the State Board of Education's preferred testing program.

At its December meeting, the Colorado State Board of Education selected the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills/Tests of Achievement and Proficiency, Form G as the test battery to be used. The State Board also required that a complete test battery (including social studies and science) be administered to students. Because it is a pilot program, the Board decided to lease rather than purchase the test booklets. All students in the specified four grades were tested in April 1986. Student and classroom results were

returned to local school districts before the end of the school year. To allow for further analysis, the state and individual district results were not released until mid-July.

At the state level, results were reported in terms of national percentile ranks for pupils at each grade for the state as a whole and by sex, race/ethnicity, district size, and district setting. The goal was to profile the achievement of the “average” Colorado student or groups of students for the different learning areas measured by the test battery. Composite scores, based on student achievement across the various learning areas, were not used. Though the reporting was based on the national percentile ranks for the average scores of students, emphasis also was placed on the percent of students with achievement in the upper and lower quartiles and the top and bottom deciles.

Because of Colorado’s Open Records Law, the achievement scores for individual school districts had to be made available to anyone requesting them. To provide a better context for understanding the individual district scores, district profiles also were prepared. The profile identified the district’s size and setting categorization and presented current district information plus the state average for variables such as fall membership (in terms of racial/ethnic groups) for the four grades tested, dropout rate, number of graduates, pupil-teacher ratio, average teacher salary, average years of teaching experience for teachers, total district revenue per pupil, and total district expenditure per pupil. The profile also included information from the 1980 census pertaining to the district such as per capita income, median income, family income, household and education attainment characteristics, and poverty status.

The design of the second year of student testing (1987) was left open in the legislation. The goal for the second year of the program was to look at a number of alternative testing models based upon input from the education community. It was reflective of the testing bill introduced in the Senate. To maximize the number of alternative measures examined, it was decided that samples, rather than every student, would be tested.

In November 1986, the readiness skills of nearly 11,000 Colorado grade 1 students (approximately 25%) were tested with the Early primary Battery of the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, Form G. The purpose of this effort was to describe the skills and abilities of students as they begin Colorado's public school system. Kindergarten is not mandatory in Colorado, though every school district offers a free kindergarten program. When the results were released in February, the national percentile rank for students of the average score for the different learning areas tested was reported as well as the percent of students in the upper and lower quartile and top and bottom decile. In addition to the standard reporting variables (state as a whole, sex, race/ethnicity, district size, and district setting), prior school experience (no prior schooling, kindergarten only, or pre-school and kindergarten) was also used as a reporting variable.

In March 1987, a five percent sample of Colorado public school students in grades 3, 6, 9, and 11 (approximately 2,000-2,500 students per grade) participated in a writing assessment based on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) model. Students in grades 3 and 6 were asked to respond to a narrative writing topic; students in grades 9 and 11 were asked to respond to an expository writing task. Because grade 6 is considered to be a pivotal point in writing instruction, the expository writing task was also administered to the grade 6 student sample. Following the NAEP model, student papers are being professionally scored in terms of the primary trait; secondary traits were also developed for use with the Colorado papers. Results will be reported in summer 1987.

During April 1987, a five percent sample of Colorado public school students in grades 3, 6, 9, and 11 (approximately 2,000-2,500 students per grade) participated in an ability-and-achievement testing program. To provide continuous data from the previous year, the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills/Tests of Achievement and Proficiency, Form G and its companion ability test, the Cognitive Abilities Test, Form 4 were administered to all students participating in the sample. In addition to demonstrating a different testing

model by adding the ability test, this program is designed to show the type of data that would result from a yearly statewide administration of a standardized achievement test battery and to compare results from testing a sample of students (by applying the 1987 sample of schools to the 1986 data) to testing every student (the 1986 data). Results will be reported in summer 1987.

The health-related physical fitness of a five percent sample of students in grades 1, 3, 6, and 8 will be surveyed in October 1987 as a part of the pilot testing program. Originally scheduled for May 1987, revisions in the planned measures and the late point in the school year necessitated delaying this survey until fall.

The purposes for both years of student testing have been to provide a number of state portraits of student achievement and to provide results that are as useful as possible to local school districts. At this point, exactly how the test results are used by the local school districts and the Colorado General Assembly is only partially known. A number of school districts have used the 1986 achievement results to re-examine their curricular approaches. The Colorado General Assembly found some assurance from the first statewide achievement test results as it struggles with the budget and school finance issues during its 1987 session. The readiness test results were used in consideration and support of a bill dealing with funding for early childhood education. The legislature also has indicated support for continuing student testing on a pilot basis for a third year — if the state's budget problems can be resolved.

The State Board of Education has used the results in preparing its priorities. The achievement results were also used for a special study of school district efficiency and effectiveness conducted by a State Board appointed committee. Indeed, the Efficiency and Effectiveness Committee recommended to the State Board that the every-student, every-district achievement testing program be conducted at least every other year. The Department of Education has used the results to identify areas where it can best provide technical assistance to local school districts.

The Colorado education community, as reflected by the coalition group responsible for the 2 + 2 concept, will also use the results to recommend to the Colorado General Assembly what type of ongoing student testing program (if any) will best serve the State of Colorado.