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Tests find USA, not students, lacking

By Arthur Levine

A national study of the impact of high-stakes standardized testing, conducted by Arizona State University and released last week, found that such exams have failed to improve students' performance. That should be no surprise.

Imagine that our nation was facing a terrible disease of the dimension of AIDS. Then imagine that the principal approach our country took to finding a cure was to create benchmarks of wellness, establish high standards for a healthy person and then set up a way to test if people with the disease had achieved those standards. Those with the terrible disease, of course, would fail the test every time. Perhaps hospitals and doctors could be held responsible for their failure.

This clearly ludicrous approach would bring us no closer to curing the disease or even to understanding its causes. Yet it is just what our country is doing in education.

Today, standards and testing are the primary approaches being taken to improve education in America: establishing expected statewide educational outcomes for all students; testing every student by subject and grade level; and holding the children and schools accountable for the results. Most states required this of their public schools, and Washington mandated it nationwide in the No Child Left Behind education act.

I applaud the idea of states setting clear, high and explicit standards for what all children are expected to learn and their schools are responsible for teaching.

I also favor the regular assessment of students to see whether they are achieving those standards, although I prefer multiple forms of assessment to a single high-stakes test. This is essential to measure student progress and school effectiveness and to provide whatever additional support children may need.

'Diseased' schools

The problem is that standards and testing do not improve failing public schools — the equivalent of those who already have that terrible theoretical disease. Failing schools are located predominantly in inner cities and rural areas. When the school-improvement movement began 20 years ago,



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America's suburban schools were strong, and our urban and rural schools were poor. Today our suburban schools are even stronger, and our urban and rural school systems, attended primarily by low-income and minority children, remain poor. Failing inner-city and rural schools and a continuing unabated achievement gap between minority and majority children — between inner-city and rural students and their suburban peers — are the primary educational challenges our country faces.

Standards and testing do not address these issues. To continue the disease analogy, to find cures for a disease, we invest in attracting talented people to the field; purchase necessary equipment and facilities; and engage in accelerated research, experimentation and expansion to achieve widespread solutions. Standards and tests make sense only after this infrastructure is in place. The standards then become the template against which the cure must be measured, and the tests become the vehicle for evaluating whether the standards have been met.

Failure to invest

Overall, America's urban and rural schools have more of the things that decrease school quality and less of the things that enrich it: more teachers who are uncertified in the subject matters they teach; more crowded classes; less money for payrolls, training, materials and facilities. In short, we never invested in the people, programs or equipment necessary to improve our urban schools. This is why after two decades of a school-reform movement, no urban school district in the United States has been successfully turned around, with the possible hotly debated exception of Houston.

So what our standards and tests tell us now is not how many of our children are failing in our cities, but how badly we as a nation are failing our low-income and minority children. We will never improve our urban schools until we invest in highly qualified and well-prepared teachers and administrators, programs that research confirms really work, up-to-date curriculum materials and modern plants and facilities. We do that for children in the suburbs. Do urban and rural children deserve any less?

Arthur Levine is the president of Teachers College at New York's Columbia University.

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