

# STANDARDISED TESTING AND WHAT IT MEANS

Curated by



## **Standardised testing and what it means.**

High-stakes standardised testing has increased in importance to the extent that it:

- drives curricula.
- takes up substantial amounts of in-class time.
- determines bonuses and funding.

On the surface, standardised testing appears to be an objective way to judge students' academic progress and, by extension, their teachers' ability to teach. Some think this is a good idea. Others, however, believe there are built-in biases to standardised testing that preclude many students from an opportunity to exhibit their knowledge. The weight placed on one measure of growth cannot adequately reflect the advances that many students make in a school year. Informed of the limitations of the Stanford Achievement Test, 9th Edition (SAT9), what do students and teachers think about the Academic Performance Indicator (API) rewards that California has tied to the test results? I decided to find out.

Recently, reserchers sat down with a group of eighth-grade students at Mountain Shadows Middle School in Rohnert Park, CA, to discuss the effects of API rewards. They also spoke with four elementary teachers from four different districts. Although only some of the schools in each district met their state-initiated goals, three of the teachers are at schools that will receive the incentives.

### **Sliding quality of education: What teachers think**

When teachers were asked what effect the API rewards have, Mr. Lee (all names are pseudonyms) stated that rewards will "force teachers to comply with a policy that doesn't do anything for the quality of education." Items likely to be cut from teachers' curricula are problem-solving, critical thinking, and diversity because standardised tests cannot measure them directly.

Another teacher, Ms. Jones, said, "People are going to start cutting standards-based curriculum to spend time on the test [items]."

Ms. Epcot said flatly, "Rewards are wrong. They'll increase pressure on teachers and students. Some teachers will cheat."

### **Sliding quality of education: What students think**

When the student group was queried, Sally, Jose, and Tom stated immediately that of course, some teachers would feel forced to cheat on those tests. Apparently, eighth graders understand how monetary incentives work. It is critical that politicians also take

into account the impact that financial rewards have on teachers' behaviour in the classroom (Morse, 2000).

### **All schools are not equal: What teachers think**

In defence of the API rewards, I brought up the state's attempt to level the playing field between schools by considering each school's demographic makeup when assigning API numbers. The unilateral response from all teachers I spoke with was, "Obviously NOT!" The teachers believe that the state's calculations should have taken the circumstances of specific populations into account. In all four districts, it is the schools with the highest percentage of low-income families and non-English speakers that are not identified receive rewards.

#### All schools are not equal: What students think

Interestingly, the student group decided that if there were no tests, there would be no cheating. "Accountability" needs to take another form. When asked what will happen if the state continues to pay API rewards, Jose said, "Teachers will only want to teach in rich schools, and no one will want to work at poor schools."

#### Solving the problem

In districts, there needs to be talking among the teachers who will receive rewards to pool the money and then redistribute it equally to all teachers in the district. Teachers recognise how challenging it is to teach low-income students and non-English speakers. Those who are slated to receive extra cash do not want to see their less fortunate colleagues penalised financially for attempting to teach students at risk of academic failure.

A practical, fair way to hold teachers accountable is to assess each individual using multiple criteria. Possible considerations are these:

- Student demographics
- Student portfolios
- Teacher portfolios
- Peer evaluations
- Administrator evaluations

#### Final thoughts

Presumably, the purpose of the API rewards is to hold teachers and schools accountable. As these interviews show, however, attaching so much importance to a single test score can be damaging to the morale and performance of both teachers and students. In order to retain the ethical, hardworking, talented teachers needed in today's

schools, it makes sense to devise a multiple-criteria approach for accountability purposes.

## **Academic Performance Indicator (API)**

### **Major benefits**

Based on the Academic Performance Indicator (API) of each school, the state of California will, between January and March 2001, distribute three different rewards for students' SAT9 (Stanford Achievement Test, 9th Edition) test scores for the 1999-2000 year:

#### **1. Governor's performance awards (GPI):**

Each school that meets or exceeds its state-determined goal will receive an amount per student. In most cases, this amounts to tens of thousands of dollars per school.

#### **2. School site employee performance bonus:**

In every school that receives the GPI reward, each teacher will receive an individual monetary reward.

#### **3. Certificated staff performance incentive act:**

Schools that do not qualify for the above two rewards because of low performance are eligible for this program. Rather than measuring year growth, these schools must show improvement in 1998-1999 SAT scores. In schools that realised more than two times their anticipated growth, those teachers will receive remuneration each. Teachers at schools with the next largest gains are due compensation each. Teachers at schools with the last largest gains will receive remuneration each.

### **Major flaws**

1. Non-English speaking students are given the test in English. Common sense dictates that schools with large populations of second-language learners will not score highly.

2. The SAT9 is not closely aligned with state standards. So, in classes where teachers follow the standards, students are tested on material that may not be taught.

3. Educational researchers (Popham, 1999; Sacks, 1997) have reported that standardised test scores are more accurately predicted by family income than by student achievement. That is not to say that a wealthy child will not score poorly or that a poor child will not score well; individuals break through barriers and belie the statistics all of the time. As a group, however, wealthy districts are more likely to have larger

numbers of high scorers, and poorer districts are more likely to have larger numbers of low scorers.

Source:

