

Why Tests Aren't Enough

~ by Gene R. Carter

In a world driven by No Child Left Behind (NCLB), assessment is often synonymous with standardized multiple-choice questions and occasional essays on reading, math, and sometimes science. But for students at Boston Arts Academy, a pilot school within the Boston Public Schools, assessment means much more.

During a three-month study of ancient Africa, 9th graders at Boston Arts Academy delved into historical, cultural, political, and economic studies of six civilizations. They created time lines, posters, living spaces, temples, and ceremonial courts. They became real individuals and representations of historic figures. However, despite the students' ability to demonstrate deep understanding of these civilizations, this type of learning is not recognized by the state's annual high-stakes assessment. As Headmaster Linda Nathan noted, "The 10th grade MCAS [Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System] has nothing to do with depth of knowledge."

As seniors, each student develops a grant proposal for a project that fulfills high academic and artistic standards and also meets a community need. Then, a panel of

outside reviewers judges the proposals and makes recommendations for awarding grants for the most distinguished. One student, Clara, studied teen homelessness by volunteering at a local shelter. She then wrote and performed a theater piece based on the life of a teenage girl she had befriended. During her graduation speech, Clara said, "I learned that knowledge is a powerful weapon that could be used to help and change humanity, but that it must be analyzed and owned first. This school

"Does testing nurture students' learning to think better, to sift through evidence, to ask questions, to take intellectual and artistic risks, to be inventive?"

developed artists and scholars that now have the power to stand as individuals and to support their own perspectives and beliefs."

As these examples of powerful exhibitions and senior projects illustrate, tests are not the only option for assessing student learning. Headmaster Nathan, who recently served on a panel to help develop ASCD's High School Reform Proposal, reminds us to question what the tests are missing. "Does testing nurture students' learning to think better, to sift through evidence, to ask questions, to take intellectual and

artistic risks, to be inventive?" Nathan asks.

The ASCD High School Reform Proposal includes multiple measures of assessment as one of its top five priorities because we know tests alone are an incomplete measure of what we want students to know and do well. ASCD has also included multiple measures of assessment as a top priority in its Legislative Agenda, because a more sophisticated system of assessment is essential for students of all ages. Better assessment systems with multiple measures mean better accountability for school improvement and better data that educators can use to help each student succeed.

Assessment expert W. James Popham has found that the majority of tests used for NCLB accountability are unable to detect instructional improvements, which means they fail to help teachers identify what strategies are working or how to adjust their instruction to better meet students' needs. On the contrary, one study found that many teachers believe the pressure of high-stakes testing has made them more likely to teach in ways that contradict their own ideas of good educational practice.

A recent research synthesis by Dan Laitsch, an education professor at Simon Fraser

Why Tests Aren't Enough - continued from page 1

University, noted a variety of unintended negative consequences that result from high-stakes testing. These downfalls range from narrowing curriculum and instructional strategies to reallocating resources away from high- and low-achieving students in order to focus on students who are closest to the cutoff between passing and failing.

As the phrase "unintended consequences" implies, no one planned for the current assessment system to exert a negative impact on education. Once we are aware of these challenges, however, it is our responsibility to correct them. Schools like the Boston Arts Academy illustrate the potential for assessment to be a powerful educational tool. It is up to us to ensure all students are able to benefit from more authentic, comprehensive assessments.

*The ASCD High School Reform Proposal and Legislative Agenda are available at <http://www.ascd.org/actioncenter>.

*Two articles by Boston Arts Academy Headmaster Linda Nathan are available in the Massachusetts ASCD newsletter, *Perspectives*, at www.mascd.org/publications/Perspectives/nathan.htm and www.mascd.org/publications/Perspectives/nathan2.htm.

*Dan Laitsch's report on high-stakes accountability is

available at http://epsl.asu.edu/epru/epru_2006_Research_Writing.htm.

Gene R. Carter is Executive Director of ASCD. He writes Is It Good for the Kids? as a regular feature on the ASCD website at <http://www.ascd.org/>. This article was presented in January 2007 and can be viewed in the Archived Issues.

Vision Statement

We are a responsive network of educational leaders which serves as the first choice for those who influence instructional policy and practices in Iowa.

It is only when we forget all our learning that we begin to know.

—Henry David Thoreau

OPPORTUNITY IS KNOCKING!

The Executive Committee is looking for members who may, in the future, be interested in serving as

Historian,

Treasurer,

OR

Editor



of Iowa Educational Leadership.

NONE of the individuals who currently hold these positions have resigned, but the Board is looking ahead to continuity issues in that eventual scenario.

If any of these positions appeal to you and match your expertise, it is a chance to be a part of a dynamic, enthusiastic group of educational leaders, and to be a part of a significant professional institution.

Please contact

Executive Director Kathryn Schladweiler at kschladweiler@mason-city.k12.ia.us.