

Standards-Based Assessment: Where are we going?

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### Abstract

Speculation on the future allows greater freedom to suggest what may or may not occur. This paper responds to the past and the present of a popular topic by predicting where it may eventually lead. Standards-based assessment has evolved from a philosophical educational model to an accountability buzzword. As a foundation, some historical perspectives on different futures for testing are presented with a discussion of common themes represented in them. Two possible futures for standards-based assessment are then described. The paper concludes with recommendations for how the educational measurement community's response to current state and federal policies regarding standards-based assessment can shape its future.

## Standards-Based Assessment: Where are we going?

“Where are we going with standards-based assessment?” is a question heard in many corners of the educational community. From the classroom teacher working to align his or her instruction to content standards to the policymaker using state assessment data to shape accountability regulations, questions about where the standards-based assessment road leads are commonplace. Although still under construction, there are multiple directions the road may lead. Assuming the role of a civil engineer, the author contemplates some of these possible directions. The opportunity to discuss the future affords one the freedom to look to the past for guidance, but speculate on what may or may not eventually occur. Nostradamus, Rasputian, and Edgar Cayce predicted the future with their seemingly psychic powers of prognostication. The variety (and vagueness) of their predictions continue to intrigue us. Orwell’s perceptions of societal and governmental characteristics are still referenced 20 years after the title of his futuristic book. An advantage of predicting the future is that the validity of the predictions cannot be evaluated until some amount of time has passed. The same can be said for testing. Many have discussed the future of testing and offered recommendations about how this future might be shaped. This paper focuses specifically on the future of standards-based assessment because of its prominence in local, state, and now federal (NCLB, 2001) assessment and accountability systems.

As a foundation for this paper’s foresight, it is important to reflect on how others have viewed the future of testing, in general, to see if there are parallels that might be applicable to the future of standards-based assessment. Cronbach and Meehl’s (1955) perspective on validity theory revised previous held thoughts about the characteristics of tests versus the characteristics of scores and how those scores were used. Although not a direct statement on the future of testing, it has shaped the foundation of current educational testing and our thinking about the construct validity evidence that supports inferences of student performance. Another indirect statement on the future of testing was offered by Page (1966) in his research on Project Essay Grader (PEG). This early effort to use computers to score writing samples has led to many current applications of computer-automated scoring in formative and summative assessment. Technology’s integration with instruction and assessment is a common theme that follows comments by others who have speculated on the future of testing.

Anastasi’s (1967) presidential address to the American Psychological Association suggested that future research address the growing disconnect between psychological theory and the methodologies used to measure the theories. Reiterating Anastasi’s concerns, Glaser (1981) also commented on the continued dissociation between the theoretical constructs and the reliance on methods. As an early supporter of criterion-referenced measurement, this disconnect was troubling to Glaser. His perspective also came at a time when standards-based education at the state level was still in its early stages and followed a challenge to state assessment systems in *Debra P. v. Turlington* (1979).

Sternberg (1984) discussed the future of intelligence testing from a cognitive psychology perspective as part of a tribute session at APA for Roger Lennon (of the Otis-Lennon Aptitude Test). Cole (1986) examined the increased role of computers in testing and discussed the opportunities to move to more technology-integrated measurement. *The*

*Future of Testing* (Plake & Mitchell, 1986) provided readers with information about predicted futures in educational, intelligence, credentialing, and employment testing.

As a recent commentary on the future of standards-based testing, Popham (2003) characterized the current state of educational testing as psychometric “purgatory”. As the science and practice of testing has improved, the public has placed a greater burden on test scores to answer the questions that educators and policymakers have. With the measurement community’s efforts to demonstrate the quality of their craft comes the reality that many users do not attend to the caveats and limitations that are included with score reports or manuals that describe appropriate usage. If these practices are not actively discouraged, they may be viewed as tacitly encouraged. This lends credence to the arguments of critics of testing and places the future in limbo.

Although the research community may influence policy to an extent, for testing, it has been more recently the case, that educational policy has greatly influenced research. Because a reasonable number of research projects are funded by grants or contracts from government agencies, the results of these efforts typically follow the needs of the policy. Educational policies are also influenced by the public’s perceptions. NCLB (Bush, 2001) did not appear out of the blue. There has been an increased demand for educational accountability for the past forty years as evidenced by the number of local education and state education agencies that have established assessment and accountability programs. Results of PDK/Gallup Polls since the 1970s have consistently reported that the public’s perceptions of public schools are average and that they support accountability measures that include tests of student performance [expand]. This trend suggests a slight shift in the most recent PDK/Gallup Poll as the public appears to believe that decisions about education should be made at the local level [expand].

NCLB is not even the first attempt to provide national level assessment and accountability evidence. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), established in 19XX, has become the de facto national test and has been elevated to a status whereby state assessment results have been compared to it in the respective content areas to determine their reasonableness. International comparisons have also been promulgated through testing programs like the Third International Mathematics and Science Series(?) (TIMSS) conducted in 19XX and sponsored by ???????. When the public evaluates the performance of students on these tests, without understanding the purpose of the tests or the definitions that correspond to the proficiency levels reported, it is not surprising that there has been a concern for educational accountability.

Previous administrations have also proposed national tests. The first Bush administration and the Clinton administration proposed Voluntary National Tests (VNT) that did not receive adequate support to proceed. 2000 Presidential candidate Al Gore proposed an education policy similar to the current NCLB legislation with greater control at the federal level.

#### Future directions

Given the current status of standards-based testing, this section offers two of a number of possible futures. One future would shift the responsibility for educational assessment and accountability to the federal level. A second future would reverse the direction and place greater responsibility on local education agencies. Each of these futures are discussed here.\*\*

Standards-based assessment has evolved from a philosophical educational model to an accountability buzzword. As a foundation, some historical perspectives on different futures for testing are presented with a discussion of common themes represented in them. Two possible futures for standards-based assessment are then described. The paper concludes with recommendations for how the educational measurement community's response to current state and federal policies regarding standards-based assessment can shape its future.