

National **School Boards** Association



Council of **Urban Boards** of Education

Keys to Success

A Summary of Must-Know Information for Urban School Board Members

April 23, 2014

Student Testing Is Subject to High-Pitched Criticism, But Research Shows Assessments Are Not All Bad

For NSBA's Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE)

Urban school board members are constantly urged to be data driven. For most people, that means keeping an eagle eye on test results. Students take diagnostic tests, assessment tests, pre- and post- tests, experimental tests, and national norm-referenced tests. Every time you turn around, it seems, somebody is sliding a spreadsheet or bar graph in front of you with more numbers to absorb. Enough already, right? Yet, not so fast. Pause to consider that perhaps testing has gotten a bad name. When done properly – and in moderation – test outcomes can be a tool, a window for policy makers to gauge student understanding and growth in learning. Let us be careful not to demonize or “hero-ize” one technique in our urban education portfolio. – *Deborah L. Keys, CUBE Director*

Background: Across the nation, parents and teachers are staging revolts. Exhausted by a barrage of tests designed to measure the knowledge of K-12 students, we see parents occasionally keeping their kids home on test days and

teachers sometimes refusing to give the exams or staging showy public protests. Scholars, pundits, and educators race to condemn “teaching to the test” and “test mania.”

Nashville, Tenn., is a good example. The *Tennessean* newspaper described Metro Nashville schools as having at least 22 students who opted out of testing this academic year. In Chicago, about 1,500 students acted similarly. A group called United Opt Out National has been active in Chicago, Denver, and other urban locations. The group is described on its website as: “parents, educators, students and social activists who are dedicated to the elimination of high stakes testing in public education.” Significantly, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Missouri, and New Mexico have all seen friction around testing.

Still, strong voices in the wilderness insist that testing is the best way to understand what students know and are able to do. Advocates assert that data and benchmarks are precise tools that confirm strengths and pinpoint weaknesses. That pushback keeps the dialogue open, and reinforces that sensible, moderate, and strategic testing – rather than indiscriminate testing for its own sake – is the way to go.

Now, a new research study suggests that teachers armed with information can better assist student progress. For urban school boards members, who can at any moment be pressed to defend district-wide testing, these social science findings are helpful. They support the case that strategic use of exams can yield a happy ending: high academic outcomes.

Steve Peha, in his newsletter *Teaching That Makes Sense*, said, “Testing is not just a black and white, for or against, issue; it’s actually a lot more interesting.... [P]erpetuating a fractured, and at times belligerent, binary view of this issue serves neither students nor teachers very well.”

Research Says: A study involving daily on-line testing – granted at the university level – yielded results that could prove useful for K-12 boards and educators to consider. The quizzes each day resulted in a 50 percent reduction in the achievement gap between upper-income and low-income students in large class sizes. Furthermore, the higher academic performance continued in subsequent courses.

An article in the *PLOS One Journal* explains, "One important self-regulatory method to improve preparation and performance is to give students frequent testing along with rapid, targeted, and structured feedback on their performance, so that they can adjust their learning and studying strategies in time to improve their performance in a course."

It concludes that, "Recent research has demonstrated that the mere act of testing helps students to remember and retrieve information more efficiently... In other words, repeated testing of students does much more than assess learning skills: It is a powerful vehicle that directly enhances learning and thinking skills."

Policy Questions to Consider:

- What is your board's policy on testing and how does that vision get implemented in district practice?
- Has your district devised consequences for teachers who buck their testing obligations? What about parents who hold students out?
- Does your board have a full roadmap of all the tests administered at every grade, and are there good justifications for each one?

For More Information:

Daily Online Testing in Large Classes: Boosting College Performance While Reducing Achievement Gaps, *PLOS One Journal*, Nov. 20, 2013

http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0079774?utm_source=TTMS+Company+Newsletter&utm_campaign=78a9a41241-Newsletter_00018_13_2013&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_06a8af076e-78a9a41241-27175729

Fewer, Better Tests Can Boost Student Achievement, *Education Week*, Oct. 7, 2014

<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2013/10/09/07tucker.h33.html>

-- By Edwin C. Darden, The Education Advocacy Firm, Inc.