

The Cutting Edge

Gary K. Clabaugh

Let's Test the Politicians

George Bush is sewing the last seam on the one-size-fits-all standardized-testing straitjacket he plans to put on most of America's kids. Bush wants to test every public school student in grades 3–8 annually in reading and mathematics and make Federal aid contingent on the results. (Those attending private schools, as Dubya did, will not have to take these tests. But that's another story.)

Essentially, this plan pits America's history of state and local control of public education against Dubya's longing for homogeneity in evaluating student "progress." Even the conservatives in Congress are saying states should be allowed to use an assortment of tests, rather than just the NAEP. Similarly, the National Governors' Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers recommend using largely incomparable state and locally chosen tests (*Education Week*, May 2, 2001). Nevertheless, Bush persists.

The cost of Dubya's plan is also a concern. The National Association of State Boards of Education claims it could require as much as \$7 billion over seven years for states to design and administer reading and math tests each year in grades 3–8. "The costs are staggering," says Brenda L. Welburn, the executive director of the National Association of State Boards of Education. "Unfortunately, neither the president nor Congress has really considered the incredible expense states will incur from this sweeping change in assessment policies. Worse, national

leaders have tried to downplay these very real, very high costs" (*Education Week*, May 9, 2001).

There also is the issue of how to deal with kids with special needs. If Bush uses the customary meat-ax approach to high-stakes testing, his plan will inevitably penalize youngsters with learning disabilities. Will he provide alternative assessments, a procedure for requesting accommodations, and a process for appeals? Will the exam test disabled students on material that they have never been taught? Already, disability rights advocates have filed a lawsuit against California's Department of Education, challenging its high school exit exam, which they say penalizes those with learning difficulties (*San Jose Mercury News*, May 9, 2001). It isn't hard to imagine Dubya's program facing a similar court challenge.

Given these looming difficulties, should Dubya's national test initiative be abolished? No, no, that's far too easy. Like Gilbert and Sullivan's Mikado, our object, all sublime, should be to make the punishment fit the crime. In other words, we should require all political aspirants to pass standardized tests. If you don't pass the test, you can't join the fest. And to make sure no deserving individual escapes our net, aspiring high-level government appointees would have to pass a test battery as well.

The simplest way to go about this testing would be to require every aspiring politico or bureaucrat to take the same tests he or she prescribes for others. Before being allowed to run for president, for example, Dubya would have to pass the math and reading tests he champions. Can you imagine him scratching his head in hopeless puzzlement? Ten to one he couldn't pass.

Our plan really gets juicy when it's applied to political hacks who have educational responsibil-

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ities. All aspiring state secretaries of education would have to pass the battery of tests they require of aspirant teachers. Here in Pennsylvania, for example, the candidates would have to pass separate NTE tests in Reading, Writing, Listening Skills, Mathematics, and Principles of Teaching and Learning. We might also want to add a content-specialty test in their college majors (secondary educators have to take them) or, alternatively, tests in Elementary Ed: Content and Curriculum—since they presume to tell elementary teachers what to do and when to do it. I for one think that few chief state school officers could pass what they now prescribe. After all, they're usually politically connected windbags, not professionally trained educators.

The beauty of this hoist-them-on-their-own-petard approach should be apparent. Officials will typically be reluctant to mandate any testing because of the nagging awareness that they too will have to take whatever they prescribe.

An alternative plan is to design brand-new tests for those aspiring to high office. This would be expensive and involved, but it might be worth it. To devise the test, we could turn to ETS and the Psychological Corporation, which employ thousands of professional test writers. They could craft the vast number of items needed for multiple versions of the test. (Given who will be taking it, cheating is a particular concern.)

Test items would be finalized only after a painstaking process. Committees both inside and outside these nonprofit firms would appraise and reappraise every question. Each item would be checked and rechecked both for accuracy and for political correctness. We might end up with items roughly like these:

When there is an unprecedented federal budget surplus available, the very *worst* course of action is to:

- repair the nation's crumbling infrastructure
- give most of it to the richest Americans
- fully fund Head Start
- pay for the impoverished elderly's prescriptions

If an attractive intern offers oral sex a public official should:

- quickly take the intern up on it before his or her mind changes
- agree, but make sure to be discreet

- politely decline
- suggest that the intern ask the official's wife or husband for permission

If, as president, you plan to emphasize "character education," the best model to base the curriculum on would be:

- J. Edgar Hoover
- Richard Nixon
- Bill Clinton
- None of the above

The most effective way to improve teacher quality is to:

- develop alternative paths into teaching similar to Georgia's four-week teacher certification program
- insist that teachers be totally dedicated regardless of how much they are paid
- hold teachers solely responsible for educational outcomes that are heavily influenced by non-school factors
- require professional schooling for teachers similar to that required of dentists, lawyers, or podiatrists

With 2% of the world's people, the U.S. annually uses what percent of the earth's consumed resources?

- 2%
- 10%
- 25%
- it doesn't matter

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With a test like this, dishonest answers will be a big problem. Safeguards are required, but how can they be implemented? One possibility is to administer the test while test takers are hooked up to lie detectors. Imagine a particularly detestable candidate sweating and squirming as the polygraph relentlessly tells the tale. "*Is that your actual answer? Is that your final honest answer?*" (Philadelphia's infamous Duce-Mayor Frank Rizzo once failed a lie detector test while

trying to prove the device's reliability. Evidently the polygraph operator asked him questions he hadn't planned on.)

Alternatively, we could inject test takers with scopolamine ($C_{17}H_{21}NO_4$), a truth serum favored by secret policemen the world over. Then the test would be administered orally as the subjects drifted guilelessly on a tripped-out cloud. Regardless of the method, however, we must be absolutely certain that our subjects are answering truthfully. And we should keep in mind that most of them will be utterly unaccustomed to doing so.

That, in broad outline, is the plan. But it needs filling in—which is where you can help. Tell us what you think. Should aspirants for public office take the same tests they prescribe for others, or should they be required to take brand-

new, custom-designed tests? If new tests are the way to go, what sorts of qualities should be tested for? Should we measure wisdom, rectitude, practical knowledge, educational expertise, sexual cravings, or what? And should we test just once, or longitudinally—every year the person is in office? (Longitudinal testing has the obvious advantage of measuring whether or not the subject is improving while “serving.”)

You also might like to suggest specific test items. They need not be multiple choice as exemplified in this commentary. Any types of questions typically found on standardized tests are welcome. Rush your comments and suggestions to The Worm Turns Foundation, c/o Newfoundations, P.O. Box 94, Oreland, PA 19075, or e-mail them to clabaugh@lasalle.edu.