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On Assessment: Less Is More

By [Invited Contributor Listed Below](#) on April 25, 2014 12:50 AM | [No comments](#)

Today's guest contributor is **Richard Noonan**, Superintendent, Wallingford-Swarthmore School District Schools, Pennsylvania.

Our national and state education policies, coupled with accelerating competition in the college admissions process, have brought schools and the people in them to the point of exhaustion on testing. Annually administered state proficiency and subject area tests, PSAT's, SAT's, ACT's, expanding Advanced Placement tests--the annual school testing calendar pretty much establishes the rhythm and structure of the school year. The push by states (including my home state of Pennsylvania) to link teacher performance to test results intensifies and fortifies the centrality of testing in the life of the school.

Is this making anyone happy? Not at the local level. My district, in a suburb of Philadelphia, recently completed an ambitious strategic planning project in collaboration with the University of Pennsylvania's [Penn Center for Educational Excellence](#). When surveyed, parents, residents, students, staff, and representatives from higher education universally proclaimed as their lead recommendation that the district should relax the invasive grip of standardized testing on curriculum, teaching, and learning in our schools.

The periodic publication and clamor about international assessment results typically strengthens the hold of testing on our schools. Politicians of all stripes jump on the results to pillory American educators and double down on standardized testing.

If we're going to talk intelligently about these international tests, let's start with what they don't agree on. PISA and TIMSS don't provide a single, universal standard of student achievement by which schools around the world can be judged. PISA, which shifts subject area focus per administration, aims to assess students' ability to "apply knowledge", while TIMSS, which looks only at math and science performance in select grades, focuses on more traditionally presented curriculum knowledge and skills.

The same country can do well on PISA, and not so well on TIMSS. Finland, broadly held-up as an educational model to the world, scores less well on TIMSS than it does on PISA. In the area of math, PISA values more of a constructivist view of knowledge, while TIMSS assesses the traditionally sequenced concepts and skills in the discipline. TIMSS mirrors the structure of NAEP testing (performance at select grades in the K-12 order), while PISA doesn't seem to have any American counterpart.

The point is that the content, structure, and emphasis of these two assessments don't reveal the same things, and certainly shouldn't lead us to the same conclusions.

This fact isn't sufficient reason to dismiss examining and learning from what international test results do reveal. We know that [NAEP performance is widely variable across the states](#). TIMSS results enable us to benchmark the performance of states in relation to whole countries around the globe. NAEP typically points to Massachusetts as the achievement leader, yet TIMSS results show a number of whole countries outperforming Massachusetts in math and science.

The "application of knowledge" that PISA tests for is well aligned with the curriculum emphasis of the [Common Core State Standards](#), which, for example, strive to develop student's ability to "think mathematically". At some future point in time, PISA offers the capacity to benchmark Common Core related assessments with international performance.

TIMSS results can offer fresh perspectives from which we can gauge our relative success in advancing select achievement goals. My district, like others, has been taking successful steps to boost the participation level of girls in the most advanced math and science courses. Still, girls in select countries around the world outperform the United States on TIMSS tests. We can examine what those countries are doing to broaden the range of strategies our own schools employ to achieve this important goal.

[As William Schmidt points out](#), there is arguably one fair conclusion that both international assessments lead us to, which is that many other countries have been more successful in establishing unifying national educational outcomes. We continue to make slow progress, via implementation of the the Core Curriculum State Standards, toward a goal that many other industrialized countries completed decades ago. Indiana's recent decision to pull-out (in order, as one politician put it, to establish curriculum "by Hoosiers, for Hoosiers") shows just how steep

the challenge is, given the strong resistance to releasing curriculum from strict local control. Still, we need to persist if our students are to be well-prepared to perform at the higher education level and in the increasingly globalized employment marketplace.

We could gain a great deal by pursuing a "less is more" testing approach in our schools. That is, reduce the scope and span of standardized testing, while ensuring that any assessment that remains is judicious and provides meaningful results. It's almost unfathomable to think that states could sign-on to regularly scheduled PISA or TIMSS testing on top of the expansive testing regimen we have in place. Yet we have to create space, in what is today an overscheduled regime of tests of all kinds, for international assessments. Participating regularly in an international education assessments can provide us with valuable benchmarks and insights. We can create that space by returning to the pre-NCLB era of state proficiency testing limited to one grade per school level. Doing so would provide those of us at the local level with the breathing room needed for a more genuine perspective on school and student progress and less frenetic data gathering.

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