

## NCLB: the alignment case for broader tests

### Summary

*No Child Left Behind*, the 2002 Elementary and Secondary Education Act, (see <http://www.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml>) requires the alignment of state tests with the state's standards. In many states these standards have been developed by the state's mathematics education leadership to reflect high international standards, often along the lines of NCTM's *Principles and Standards for School Mathematics*. They reflect a much broader set of performance goals than are assessed in most state tests.

There are now reliable *alignment protocols*, independent of the test publishers, that measure alignment. *Standards-based assessment* that covers this broader spectrum of performance is available. However, there are obstacles to the adoption of standards-based tests by states, including unfamiliarity and higher cost.

A system's professional leadership in mathematics education can play a key role in achieving better-aligned tests – a crucial element in advancing *standards-based improvement*. Useful actions for mathematics supervisors and their colleagues to take include:

- Take leadership in the development of formative assessment programs for districts that will give local districts data on progress during the year. These local assessment programs can afford to be broader and deeper than state programs but they will be much more effective if the state tests include similar tasks. They can provide the foundation for a continuing program of *assessment-led improvement*.
- As opportunities arise, work to ensure that state tests are aligned with state standards, as required by NCLB (see below).

### Purpose

To help those working toward standards-based improvement achieve high-stakes assessment that is well-aligned with state standards – such assessment will support rather than, as often at present, undermine that program.

### Achieving better-aligned state tests

"No Child Left Behind" specifies that the "...State Assessment System, for each grade and subject assessed:

- must address the depth and breadth of the State content standards.
- be valid, reliable and of high technical quality.
- express student results in terms of State academic achievement standards.
- be designed to provide a coherent system across grades and subjects."

It further states that "States may include either or both

- Criterion-referenced assessments
- Norm-referenced assessments if –
  - The test is augmented with additional items as necessary to measure accurately the depth and breadth of the academic content standards, and
  - The results are expressed in terms of the State's academic achievement standards."

The choice of state tests is a complex, and usually highly political, process with many competing interests. The mathematics education community will have more influence if it has already built good relationships with system leadership and the assessment specialists. Opportunities will arise from time to time to try to ensure that state tests are aligned with

state standards – that this is required by NCLB is a powerful argument, though rarely decisive. The following are key elements in increasing the probability of emerging with a test that is, indeed, well-aligned:

- Get language into any RFP for the state test that requires the alignment of state tests with state standards to be independently authenticated (by a committee of state curriculum experts and practitioners) using a fairly rigorous *alignment protocol* that comes from a source independent of test vendors. This should give the mathematic education leadership more influence than usual over the assessment, and a seat at the table during the approval of proposed tests.
- Get a good range and balance of exemplar items and constructed-response assessment tasks into the test blueprint that goes into your state’s RFP. Draw exemplars of substantial mathematical tasks from your own standards documents where possible and from sources of *standards-based assessment* tasks like *MARS*, *New Standards*, *Freudenthal Institute*, and *NCTM* documents.
- Specify, in the RFP, certain ingredients of the score reports that go to schools and parents. Subscores related to state standards or groups of standards should be specified. At least one of these subscores should explicitly measure the problem solving and reasoning dimension of your standards. The substantial tasks will provide the major part of this problem solving subscore.

### **Strengths**

- There is substantial evidence that the *implemented curriculum* in most classrooms is dominated by the kinds of performance that are found in high-stakes tests – aligned tests will encourage teaching that is aligned with the standards in a balanced way.
- Other benefits include improved student motivation and, particularly, through the power of *professional development for and through performance assessment* help for teachers to understand the benefits of standards-based mathematics, and to handle a *standards-based mathematics curriculum* in their classroom.
- The basis of this approach is the law – NCLB requires alignment of tests with state standards. While those working in the system may find it difficult to press this issue, there will be others who can.
- The improved student learning outcomes that can be expected from a standards-based curriculum, particularly when the tests recognize the full range of achievement.
- There is substantial evidence that curriculum in the classroom is dominated by the kinds of performance that are found in high-stakes tests.

### **Likely challenges**

- The greater cost of standards-based assessment, along with its unfamiliarity, is likely to encourage system decisions to stay with current cheaper tests. The dominant influence of high-stakes tests on the pattern of classroom learning is often underestimated, or ignored.

### **References**

Norman Webb at <http://facstaff.wcer.wisc.edu/normw/> offers a series of papers that look in more detail at alignment issues.