

Replacing ISTEP+: Let's Get It Right This Time

Introduction

The word “change” is a neutral word. Many times the word “change” is used when something is not working. ISTEP+ is a perfect example. Educators and administrators have been voicing their concerns over ISTEP+ for many years because Indiana has been using the wrong kind of test (ISTEP+) in the wrong kinds of way (evaluating and ranking teachers, and school districts.) Now the Indiana Legislature comes to the rescue announcing the demise of ISTEP+. The word “change” has been used over and over in the process. A “change” in the type of standardized test being used does not mean there will be improvement. With “change” being a neutral word, sometimes change is bad and sometimes change is good. A better word to use is “improvement.” That word connotes improvement. So until a conscious decision is made about what test, if any, will be used to replace ISTEP+, and since it's a change of a test, there might be a celebration over the change or there just might be some mourning. Either way, until Indiana grasps the true issues regarding the flaws of standardizing testing, there just might be more mourning than celebration over the demise of ISTEP+.

The Flaws of Standardized Testing

The beginning of standardized testing in public education can be traced to the “accountability” movement that started with the 1983 report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education titled “A Nation at Risk.” Because of this report legislators began calling for measurable accountability. Looking at the standardized mechanisms being used by the College Board and Educational Testing

Service (ETS), legislators began requiring mass implementation of standardized testing into U.S. public schools.

Standardized testing is a one-size-fits-all process for determining whether or not, on a mass scale, if all children are progressing academically. In their research titled "Test Problems: Seven Reasons Why Standardized Tests Are Not Working", authors Dr. David Miller Sadker and Dr. Karen R. Zittlmen list some pitfalls to standardized testing. First, they indicate that at-risk students are placed at greater risk because of the lack of equity in educational systems across the country. Unless all students receive the same quality of education, standardized tests cannot effectively measure student academic progress. Second, they indicate standardized testing is causing higher dropout rates among minority students. When minority students continue to fail standardized tests and are then held back, they tend to drop out of school. The result is a false perception that standardized testing is improving the education system when in fact it is destroying the joy of learning for many minority students. Third, they cite several studies which show standardized testing is narrowing the curriculum. Teachers have less time to teach and students less time to learn because of the many days of testing now added to the requirements of public schools. On average, U.S. public schools students lose approximately 80 - 100 school days on standardized testing between grades three and ten. The reality of the higher scores might just be, outside of more dropouts, students are becoming better test-takers but are not necessarily receiving a better education.

Not only is Indiana having issues with its standardized testing company's implementation, so too are other states. Consider Minnesota. As reported in the *New York Times* by Diana Henriques and Jacques Steinberg, thousands of high schools students were in danger of not graduating because of failing their state's standardized math test. A frustrated father, who is an attorney, requested to see his daughter's test. State education officials refused his request. Upon threat of a lawsuit, education officials allowed him to finally see it. Of the 68 questions on the test, he found the test scoring company had scored six questions incorrectly. The scoring company ended up paying approximately \$7 million to cover for all the issues associated with this major scoring error.

Standardized testing is a big business. Dr. Diane Ravitch, on her blog dated May 20, 2012, indicates, "The test salespeople and lobbyists for the testing industry have sold the American people a bill of goods. Either we buy their product, and more of it, and pay them for the prep materials, and pay them for test security, and pay test coordinators, or no one will get a good job in the future. Don't believe it."

The Right Path for Public Education

Does anyone really believe that using a constantly changing metric to grade public schools will improve public education? There is no empirical evidence anywhere in the world that supports the so called "education reform" mandated by Indiana's legislature. Yet, despite all of the efforts of Indiana's educational leaders providing to legislators the proven models that will ensure a high quality education for all students, Indiana continues to implement unproven methods that are

seriously damaging public school students from being competitive with the world's best.

Recently Dr. Pasi Sahlberg visited West Lafayette, Indiana as a keynote presenter at the Wabash Valley Education Service Center's public education conference. He spoke about the commonalities of the top performing countries whose students score very well on the Program for International Assessment (PISA). This is the international test used by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) to rank the PISA scores of fifteen-year-old students from 44 countries. This is the international test that is sometimes used by various special interest groups to convince the general public that the United States public education system is falling behind.

Dr. Sahlberg presented his research about the commonalities found within the best performing countries per the PISA scores and those countries, like the United States, that are considered to be losing ground per the PISA scores. The chart below shows the commonalities between both groups.

Best Education Systems per the PISA Scores	Countries Falling Behind per the PISA Scores
1. Allowing educators to personalize the education system for their students.	1. Standardizing school curriculum, instructional and testing.
2. Implementing educator-based assessments to measure the effectiveness of the education system.	2. Using standardized tests to grade schools and evaluate teachers.
3. Investing in educators to improve teaching and learning within the classroom.	3. Using competition to rank and sort public schools.
4. Investing in school equity so all children, regardless of where they live, have a high quality education	4. Implementing school choice.

Very soon the Indiana legislature is expected to announce a replacement to ISTEP+. If Indiana students are to receive a high quality education regardless of

where they live, then it is time for Indiana to get on the right path to ensure all Indiana students receive a personalized, educator-driven model of curriculum, instruction and assessment. Dr. Sahlberg's research is the first step down that path.

Measuring Student Learning Over Time

So what would be an improvement over ISTEP+? Many educators believe in the process of measuring student learning over time using formative assessments. In her article "Three Reasons to Prioritize Formative Assessment in the Classroom", Kathy Dyer indicates that formative assessments should focus on two things: "teachers and students gathering accurate information in the moment, and teachers using that information to quickly adapt instruction."

Imagine Indiana teachers getting student assessment information very quickly to help them make informed instructional decisions about their students? Genius! Of course it may take an act of God in Indiana to allow educators the authority to use formative assessments to replace ISTEP+. If that were to happen, rather than changing ISTEP+ for another assessment, it would be an actual improvement over ISTEP+.

Short, formative assessments given three times a year is a much better process for measuring student academic progress overtime. However, formative assessment scores should not be used to evaluate teachers or grade school districts. The sole purpose of formative assessments should be to see how students are doing over time and to give teachers immediate feedback so they can better help their students improve.

Multiple Forms of Assessment

Other forms of student assessment should be considered and flexibility should be given to educators to use the appropriate assessment for the students they serve. Not every child does well on a multiple-choice, short answer test. Some students can better show how much they have academically grown by verbalizing to their teachers what they know, or by producing a product, or by teaching others what they know. Educators should be given the autonomy to determine how best to assess their students. If this were to happen, then more teachers would stay in the profession and more high school graduates might consider entering the teaching profession.

Summary

Over the next few months, a 23-member panel will study a replacement for ISTEP+. As Indiana continues to waste nearly \$100 million on this exercise of educational futility, Hoosiers should remember not to allow ISTEP+ results, or any standardized test, to define the children from and the schools of their respective communities. Standardized testing, specifically ISTEP+, will never provide a true picture of Indiana public schools or communities because of what it cannot measure. Here are some things that ISTEP+ or any other standardized test can never measure:

1. A child's creativity;
2. The educational progress made by students over time due to their hard work and the hard work of their parents, teachers, and school support staff;

3. The educational impact arts, music, physical education, sports and academic clubs have on each student who participates;
4. The impact teachers, support staff and administrators have on the children they serve;
5. The post-secondary success public school graduates achieve;
6. The individual gifts of each child; and
7. A child's love of learning.

In Valerie Strauss' article "The important things standardized tests don't measure", Arthur Costa, emeritus professor at California State University, provides a salient statement regarding what mandated standardized testing has done to the quality of public education. "What was educationally significant and hard to measure has been replaced by what is educationally insignificant and easy to measure. So now we measure how well we taught what isn't worth learning."

Strauss goes on to indicate that "using the scores on standardized tests to shape the life chances of students, determine the pay and reputation of teachers, gauge the quality of school administrators, establish the worth of neighborhood schools, or as an excuse to hand public schools over to private, profit-taking corporations is, at the very least, irresponsible." She goes on to say that it is also unethical.

Using appropriate tests to measure a student's academic progress over time is a worthy venture so long as the test is not used inappropriately to evaluate teachers, grade school corporations or determine a child's future. The things ISTEP+ cannot measure should be used to help determine a child's future, the effectiveness of a teacher and the quality of a school. Let's get it right this time around.

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