

# A Personalized Preface for *Members of the Public*

I recently wrote *The ABCs of Educational Testing: Demystifying the Tools That Shape Our Schools* about educational tests and how they should be (and shouldn't be) used. From this point forward, for brevity's sake, that book will be referred to as *The ABCs*. It was written for five different audiences, namely, teachers, school administrators, educational policy-makers, parents of school-age children, and members of the public. All five of those groups have a serious stake in the success of our schools. Moreover, educational testing plays a pivotal, often unrecognized, role in how effectively our children are educated. However, while it may be efficient to aim a book simultaneously at multiple groups of readers, such a strategy prevents an author from exploring particular topics that might be of interest to a specific group of readers. Accordingly, I am taking the following opportunity to address several issues that may be of special interest to one of those five reader-groups, in this instance to members of the public.

## A LABELING CHALLENGE

As indicated above, I wrote *The ABCs* for five different audiences. As I was initially deciding for whom to write a book intended to demystify educational tests, I concluded that all five of the audiences I was considering did, in fact, have a stake in what I wanted to yammer about. Oh, it could be argued with effectiveness that *educators* such as teachers and school administrators have a greater stake in the nature of educational tests than *citizens*, most of whom have no formal relationship to such testing. But it could also be argued with effectiveness that what goes on in a society's schools surely shapes that society's future. I concluded, therefore, that one of the five audiences I would have in mind when I was writing *The ABCs* would always be members of the public.

Once that decision had been made, a minor but vexing dilemma then sauntered into my skull, namely, *what to call these members of the public?* This is a more difficult task than it may, at first blush, appear. Here's why. Let's say I had chosen "citizens" as the label that I would use every now and then when writing *The ABCs* to refer to members of the public. Does separating out such "citizens" indicate that the other groups I am writing to, such as teachers or educational policy-makers, are *not* citizens? Of course, it doesn't. Nonetheless, appearing to wrest away citizenship from those other four groups of readers did not seem altogether appropriate. Nor, for that matter, did constantly being obliged to spell out the four-word phrase, "members of the public."

A trip to the *Thesaurus*, regrettably, did not provide any handy solution. Being obliged to write about "inhabitants" or "denizens" simply seemed silly. The other synonyms for "citizen" were even more inappropriate.

I suppose these days that I might have opted for "Joe Six-Pack" or his charming spouse, "Jill Six-Pack." I sometimes hear those labels tossed around. But while perhaps up-to-date, such labels appear to endorse alcohol-consumption in a manner that most educators shouldn't. I soon scratched the Six-Pack option.

A long, long while ago, when I first began to take graduate courses in education, one of the most influential writers of that era was Ralph W. Tyler of the University of Chicago. Because Tyler recognized the potentially important contributions of members of the public to the way our schools operate, he too was faced with a labeling problem. The way he solved it was by referring to such folks as “garden-variety citizens.” Well, perhaps back in the 1950s many more people tilled their own back-yard gardens, so that such a label might have worked at that time. When I played around with Tyler’s label in my own head, “garden-variety citizens” simply didn’t do it for me. (Many of my friends cannot distinguish between a garden-grown radish or carrot.) I was beginning to run out of options.

Thus, faced with this apparently insoluble labeling puzzle, I found myself more and more thinking about “citizens with a footnote.” In other words, I decided to use the term “citizens” to signify my fifth group of intended readers, but always to ask readers to append to this label a mental footnote indicating that my fifth group of readers described those citizens *other* than the first four groups of designated readers for *The ABCs*. Please regard this paragraph as a formal request for you to invoke my mental footnote when you encounter the word “citizen.”

Okay, the labeling problem having been adequately resolved, or at least sufficiently submerged, from here on in if I refer to “citizens,” I am referring to *you* and your garden-variety buddies. Let’s turn now to *why on earth* a citizen would ever want to learn more about the sorts of testing that goes on in our schools.

## CULTURE MASSAGING

A society’s *culture* refers to a group of individuals’ general customs, beliefs, and ways of life at a particular time. In general, a society attempts to shape its culture by controlling what the society’s youth are taught during their days in

society-supported schools. I'll try to illustrate the point with an issue that was attracting much attention during the time I was writing *The ABCs*. The Common Core State Standards (CCSS) describe a set of K-12 curricular aims in mathematics and language arts, that is, the knowledge and skills to be mastered by students while in school. Stimulated not only by federal dollars, but also by significant contributions from private foundations, the CCSS were released in 2010 and were accepted as state-approved curricular aims by education officials in more than 40 states. Such a widespread acceptance of the CCSS was followed in the next few years, particularly as federal and private support-levels began to diminish, by many states' "re-thinking" the wisdom of their initial acceptance of the CCSS. Because what's sought in the CCSS, and even more importantly, what's assessed by statewide tests designed to measure students' achievement of those curricular aims, currently has had an enormous influence on the way children in many states are being taught, it should be apparent that the current controversy about what's being promoted by the CCSS should be of concern to every U.S. citizen—including you. Currently, the future of the CCSS and the state-approved tests intended to measure students' mastery of the CCSS is unclear.

Whereas many citizens may not recognize the possibility, or the obligation, of taking part in influencing how our schools measure students' progress, the reality is that as a member of our society, all citizens can have a shot at influencing how testing takes place in our schools. Oh, I know all too well how easy it would be to brush this sort of request aside and say something such as, "That's the job of the educators." Yet, these are *our* schools—they will shape *our* society's culture—and *you* are a citizen of that society. If you pay taxes, you're paying for those schools. Put the argument together!

Throughout the year, whether at the state or local level, a number of choice-points arise that are dependent directly on educational assessment and that also have a significant impact on the way students are taught. Those are the moments when a citizen who understands the fundamentals of educational

assessment can sometimes play a meaningful role in influencing the choice of tests selected and, therefore, can help determine what is taught. Remember, in any evidence-oriented school system, those who control the evidence-producing tests *control everything*.

For example, several states have recently chosen college-admissions tests for measuring the effectiveness of their state's schools. While those admissions tests have been shown to predict with reasonable accuracy a high-school student's subsequent academic success in college, the tests are *unaccompanied* by evidence supporting the *evaluative* use to which they are now being put. An assessment-knowledgeable citizen who understands why such a use of educational tests unsupported for a particular usage can register concerns about such a potentially misleading use of tests.

In Chapter 4 of *The ABCs* you will be learning that the validity of score-base inferences about test-takers must be accompanied by *evidence* supporting the particular purpose to which test-results are being put. Moreover, you will be learning that the demand for purpose-supportive evidence is clearly spelled out in the most influential set of nationally sanctioned guidelines bearing on the way educational tests should be built and used.

## WHERE TO INFLUENCE—AND HOW?

At this point in my brief personalized preface to citizens, you might legitimately be asking where and how does a typical citizen have a chance to influence what goes on in our schools. Well, do you recall the adage that “in the land of the blind, a one-eyed person is ruler?” (The adage is slightly massaged here in the interest of gender equity.) If so, you'll realize that your possession of the nine understandings set forth in *The ABCs* will make you so much more knowledgeable than almost everyone around you—that your views regarding educational testing's basics will be influential—possibly even regal.

Perhaps you might see that a public discussion of an assessment-related issue is taking place in your school district—or at a school close to your home. Drop in. See what’s being discussed. And don’t be reluctant to offer your reactions to what’s being considered. If you think that most of the people in attendance possess more measurement moxie than you, you’re almost certain to be wrong. Merely because all of today’s adults took tests while they were in school does not indicate they will know anywhere close to how much you’ll know about educational testing—after you’ve completed *The ABCs*. Share that knowledge at any time, and with any other person(s), you think appropriate.

The world of education is not currently awash with people who know all that much about the fundamentals of educational testing. Yours can be a voice of knowledgeable reason that, if offered at the right moment, can make a key difference. Letters to the editor of a local newspaper (if your locality still has a local newspaper) or e-mails sent to legislators or members of boards of education regarding educational-testing issues can sway people. Remember, you will have become a *sighted* commentator in the land of the blind.

Good luck, one-eyed citizen!

*W. James Popham*