

A Personalized Preface for *Educational Policymakers*

I recently wrote *The ABCs of Educational Testing: Demystifying the Tools That Shape Our Schools* to address 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 policymakers, 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 opportunity to address several issues that may be of special interest to each of those five reader-groups, in this instance to educational policymakers.

WHY TANGLE WITH TESTING?

Educational policymakers make educational policies. You heard it here first! Well, perhaps you didn't.

The readers I have in mind for this short preface are chiefly members of school boards (local or state) and legislators (local, state, and federal). These are the individuals who establish the policies that govern the ways our schools operate. Educational policymakers, for example, can determine how heavily to weight students' test scores when evaluating schools. Educational policymakers can also require teachers to employ more frequent classroom tests—not for student-grading, but for student-learning. There is no doubt, none at all, that educational policymakers can have an immense impact on the way tests are used in our schools.

The effectiveness of many significant educational policies is determined, after the policies are implemented, by the way students perform on the tests that measure how much students have learned. To be sure, the merits of a good many educational policies can be determined on other grounds, for example, those hinging on the soundness of a school district's fiscal practices or on the structural integrity of a district's school buildings. Nonetheless, the worthiness of many of our most crucial educational policies is determined by the way students perform on tests.

Accordingly, for educational policymakers to function optimally in a policy-setting role, it is necessary for them to be sufficiently familiar with the key tenets of educational assessment. That's because the most essential elements of certain under-consideration policies will not then be cloaked by seemingly incomprehensible technical language. In *The ABCs* you will soon recognize that, at its heart, educational testing is a remarkably straightforward activity. Put simply, here it is: We can't see what's going on in students' heads, so we get them to respond to a collection of test items, and then infer from those responses what skills and knowledge those students possess. Based on these inferences, teachers make

more informed decisions about how best to instruct their students. Even when using higher-stakes tests, such as statewide annual accountability tests, these “test-and-infer” fundamentals are still the same.

However, beyond the basic operation of inferring students’ unseen abilities from their test performances, a number of sometimes subtle differences can take place in the development of tests for different education-related purposes. In Chapter 2 of *The ABCs*, for example, you’ll learn that there are three fundamental purposes of educational tests: (1) to compare test-takers’ abilities, (2) to improve ongoing instruction or learning, and (3) to evaluate the quality of instruction. If a test that’s been built for one of these purposes is used for another purpose, odds are that the data provided by that wrong-purposed test will be misleading. And this is, perhaps, the chief reason an educational policymaker needs to be comfortable when dealing with test-based evidence, that is, to recognize whether the proper test is being used.

AN HONEST-TO-GOODNESS SINE QUA NON: VALIDITY

I studied Latin for five years, two in high school and three in college. Accordingly, I try desperately to use a dash of Latin whenever I can. (Sometimes, regrettably, several weeks go by and there’s no legitimate occasion to squeeze a bit of Latin into a conversation.) As a policymaker, however, you need to recognize that in the realm of educational measurement, *assessment validity* constitutes an authentic *sine qua non*.

Somewhere during my five years of laboring in Latin classes, I learned that the phrase *sine qua non* means “without which not” and can, therefore, be translated as “an essential condition.” Well, with regard to educational testing, you’ll read in *The ABCs* that assessment validity is, indeed, a legitimate, Sunday-go-meeting *sine qua non*. Yes, validity is *that* important.

Assessment validity refers not to a test itself but, rather, to the accuracy with which test-based interpretations are made. Moreover, if accurate, those interpretations must support *a test's intended purpose*. Accordingly, *tests* are not valid or invalid. Instead, it is a score-based interpretation that's valid or not.

As you will learn in Chapter 4 of *The ABCs*, *evidence* must be at hand to support the accuracy of an interpretation consonant with the intended use of the test. If there's insufficient evidence to support the purpose-consonant accuracy of the test interpretations, then no confidence—none at all—should be placed in the test's results. Thus, a test unaccompanied by adequate evidence that it provides accurate score-based inferences for its intended use should incline educational policymakers to disregard the results of such a test. Because an *essential condition* of test use is absent, then a clear-thinking educational policymaker will scurry from any test-based application or interpretation based on that test.

BUSY ARE THE EDUCATIONAL POLICYMAKERS

Through the years, I've testified before many legislative committees and spoken to many state and local school boards. From those encounters, and from follow-up friendships, I have learned one truth for sure: Educational policymakers are busy people.

This recognition translates into a corollary conclusion, namely, that busy people cannot realistically be expected to spend gobs of time becoming genuinely expert in all fields—including educational assessment. Fortunately, what you'll learn in *The ABCs* will be sufficient for dealing with most of the assessment-linked issues you'll encounter as you are embroiled in policy-making. And for the handful of instances when you might really need the assistance of an assessment expert, you will know enough about testing's fundamentals to comprehend what such an assessment expert can provide to

you. You'll be reading that if many assessment experts have been asked to supply plain-talk explanations of some esoteric measurement concepts, they can usually do so—if the audience possesses familiarity with assessment's basics. *The ABCs* will supply you with those basics.

External assessment consultants, the ones who have been asked to supply understandable explanations of an issue under consideration, need not be too costly to employ for such work. A modest financial honorarium, for instance, will prove enticing for most university professors, as will an opportunity to contribute to deliberations apt to have an impact on the real world of schooling rather than merely impressing one's academic counterparts.

Yet, as emphasized often in *The ABCs*, unless a policymaker is reasonably knowledgeable about the most significant of educational assessment's concepts and procedures, he or she is unlikely to grasp what's being described by a consultant or to raise key clarifying questions.

TOP OF THE HEAP IMPORTANCE

Appropriate assessment-related educational policies can be implemented well or poorly. If implemented well, kids win. If implemented badly, kids lose. But at least the potential for kid-winning is present when an assessment-related educational policy is appropriate. On the contrary, however, if an assessment-related educational policy is inappropriate, there's no chance at all for a kids-win scenario—no chance at all.

And this is why, because educational policymakers are sitting atop education's influence mountain, it is so imperative that they become conversant with the rudiments of educational assessment. If educational policymakers adopt an intrinsically unsound policy related to educational testing, then there is little that can be done by teachers, administrators, parents, or citizens at large to overcome those unsound policies. Because educational policymakers are so

inordinately important to schooling, therefore, the need for them to comprehend the nine understandings set forth in *The ABCs* becomes even more imperative.

I wish you well in soaking up those understandings, and leaning on them—when necessary—in your important work.

W. James Popham