

A Personalized Preface for *Parents*

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*. The book 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 opportunity to address several issues that may be of special interest to each of those five reader-groups, in this instance to parents of school-age children.

AN IMPROVED-LEARNING PERSPECTIVE

I have four children. It was my Catholic period. They all attended public schools, and I was quite pleased with the

quality of education each of them received. To be honest, when my kids were growing up, I knew very little about educational assessment, and I did not rely on test results when arriving at my judgments about the caliber of my children's schooling. I am not being modest, just accurate. Later on, after a major shift in my career interests, I immersed myself in educational testing. But while my children were completing a K-12 education, I could barely spell "test," much less identify educational testing's basics.

Back then, if I had been asked to read a book about educational testing, I would surely have done so from a perspective of how I could help my kids do better in school. With few exceptions, this will be the focus of most parents when they read *The ABCs*. It is an understandable and altogether appropriate perspective. Such a perspective can be labeled a *learning-improvement orientation*. When parents who have a learning-improvement orientation encounter much of the content in *The ABCs*, they will often be trying to see what its implications are for helping their children learn better.

To illustrate, an "instructionally diagnostic" educational test is one that can help determine which skills or bodies of knowledge have been mastered by a student. Skills and knowledge that have not been mastered, once identified by such a test, can then be tackled by teachers with greater instructional intensity—often employing teaching tactics *other* than whatever approach was used the first time around.

But instructionally diagnostic tests must contain a sufficient number of items for each skill or body of knowledge that's being measured. Students' performances on a reasonably large number of items permits valid inferences to be made about students' mastery of what's been assessed. Well, suppose that the tests routinely being used by your child's teacher contain very few items for each assessed skill or body of knowledge—so few, in fact, that it is impossible to get an *accurate* fix on whether the specific things being measured have been mastered. Because such tests are not instructionally diagnostic, your child is missing out on the subsequent

instructional benefits that this kind of testing provides. After reading *The ABCs*, you'll be positioned to register concerns with a teacher or, if necessary, with a school administrator, about any prolonged absence of instructionally diagnostic testing.

Certain assessment-related insights that parents can derive from *The ABCs* can also lead to at-home support activities from parents. To illustrate, when significant "high-stakes" assessments such as a federally required annual accountability test have been taken by students, reports are routinely provided to a student's parents. As you will learn in *The ABCs*, these score-reports should be easily interpretable by parents. Indeed, potential test-based at-home actions should be made clear to parents and, if students are old enough, to students themselves. If your school district or your state is supplying score-reports that are not sufficiently clear, or not accompanied by information about what kinds of actions parents can take regarding their child's scores, then *The ABCs'* chapter on score-reporting will help you decide whether to register complaints about your child's score-reports.

Whether your newly found understandings about educational assessment lead to school-based actions or to home-based actions, the goal is to help your child learn. The more thoroughly you grasp the meaning of the assessment-related understandings presented in *The ABCs*, the more effectively you will be able to stimulate in-school or at-home actions leading to increases in your child's learning.

PARENTS: A POTENT POWER GROUP

It's important for parents to realize how influential they can be in modifying the educational practices in a school, district, or state when they band together. Just think for a moment about the political players currently romping in the world of educational politics and it becomes clear why an organized group of parents can have an enormous impact on how their schools

operate. Positions of advocacy taken by an informed group of parents are so influential because parents' only vested interest is *the well-being of their children*. Talk about operating from the high ground!

The educational policy stances of teachers and school administrators, even if eminently reasonable, are often dismissed by critics as "self-serving." The educational policy stances of elected legislators or board members can also be dismissed because such positions can be seen as "politically motivated" or "re-election rooted." Indeed, many groups' educational preferences can always be regarded as potentially biased. But such is not the case with the policymaking preferences of an organized parent group. Such parental groups simply reek of *nonpartisanship*—a cherished commodity in education's often politicized arena. A well-organized, suitably informed group of parents can, often by capturing the support of the general citizenry, constitute a remarkably potent force for spurring educational improvements.

If, after reading *The ABCs*, you identify what you regard as a major *misuse* of educational tests in your own locale, then you may wish to give serious thought to the formation of an action-influence group capable of registering its demands for assessment-related changes with local or state school boards—or even with a state legislature. Leaders listen to organized groups of nonpartisan parents who are only urging what's best for their children. And, although larger groups frequently carry more persuasion weight than smaller groups, do not underestimate the potential impact on decision-makers of even a tiny group of nonpartisan parents arguing for what's best for their own children.

Over the years we have seen too few instances of parents grasping the significance of their potential political influence and acting on it. After reading *The ABCs*, you are likely to identify several test-related issues of sufficient significance that you may choose to assemble a group of like-minded parents who, having recognized certain shortcomings in the way educational tests are being employed locally, wish to correct

those misuses. Suppose a small group of parents studies the annual accountability tests being used by a major school district to evaluate each school's success and, in so doing, discovers those tests are unaccompanied by *any* evidence that the tests are suitable for such an evaluative mission. Such a parent group, then, could raise this concern at a regular meeting of the district's school board. The request could be framed as a simple recommendation: "Either supply sufficient evidence that the evaluative tests you're using are suitable, or use other tests." After you've read *The ABCs*, you'll be in a position to take part in forming such a group. You will have learned enough about "instructionally insensitive" evaluative tests to demand the use of tests better suited to the evaluation of the district's schools—the schools that are educating your child.

AN UNWARRANTED ASSUMPTION

Many parents of school-age children make an assumption that, though understandable, is flat-out wrong. They assume their children's teachers are quite knowledgeable regarding the ins and outs of educational assessment. Unfortunately, the vast majority of today's teachers have never completed a formal course dealing with the basics of educational testing. Parents should not fault their children's teachers for failing to study educational testing, because completion of a formal course in educational assessment was not required during most teachers' pre-service programs leading to their licensure. Obligatory post-licensure requirements for teachers to complete professional development courses in assessment are equally rare.

The distressing reality is that when a parent has completed *The ABCs* and comprehended all or most of the book's basic understandings about educational assessment, that parent is apt to know considerably more about educational testing than the teachers who are instructing the parent's child. This is not a suggestion that a parent should set out to demean a teacher who knows less about testing than the

parent. Instead, it is a reminder that because most teachers—and also most school administrators—were not required to complete coursework in educational assessment, parents are quite likely to know more about testing’s basics than the educators with whom they may be raising assessment-related issues.

This situation presents a marvelous opportunity for parents and teachers to collaborate when learning about educational testing’s fundamentals. Both parents and teachers can be focused on the ways that appropriate educational testing can enhance students’ learning. Collaboratively organized and delivered programs focused on the basics of educational assessment can benefit both groups.

STANDARDS WITH SOCK

In *The ABCs* you’ll be learning about the existence of a set of officially endorsed precepts regarding how educational testing ought to take place. These are the *Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing* released in mid-2014 by the three national associations most concerned with educational measurement. Referred to in *The ABCs* as the joint *Standards* (because of the three sponsoring groups), the 2014 revision is the latest in an oft-revised collection of guidelines representing “best professional practice” related to educational testing. Because, in courtroom litigation involving educational tests, the joint *Standards* have historically had a profound impact on judicial rulings, their importance is widely conceded. Test organizations, for example, routinely strive to make their tests coincide with what’s recommended in the joint *Standards*.

Thus, if you—as a parent—ever find yourself in a situation where you need to invoke the views of an acknowledged authority related to an assessment dispute in which you are involved, be sure to check out the joint *Standards* to see if it addresses the issue about which you are disagreeing. *The ABCs* recommends that those who are conversant with the

book's nine understandings hire an assessment consultant capable of providing plain-talk explanations of particular assessment-related concepts or procedures. If such a tactic appeals to you, be sure to have the consultant describe how the pertinent precepts of the joint *Standards* bear on the issue at hand.

FINAL ENCOURAGEMENT

Here's one last point that's intended to get you revved up regarding the merits of reading a plot-free book about a topic you never thought you'd be considering. What I'm tossing you is an insight based on my more than 60 years as an educator. To accentuate its importance, I've even gussied it up by italicizing it: *Because educational assessment has now become a dominant factor in the way our students are educated, parents have an almost moral responsibility to comprehend its basics.* Because I'm a parent, and you're a parent, and parent-to-parent lying is surely prohibited somewhere by some sort of code, you simply must believe me.

W. James Popham