

A Personalized Preface for *School Administrators*

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 school administrators.

IN A SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR'S WHEELHOUSE

The expression “in someone’s wheelhouse” refers to an individual’s being in complete control of what’s coming next. It is based on the wheelhouse of a fishing boat, a small windowed room in the center of a boat where the helm (a wheel used for steering the boat) is located. Because the helmsman has access in the wheelhouse to all that’s needed to manage the boat, the helmsman is regarded to have everything under control.

The initial chapter in *The ABCs* trots out two reasons underscoring the need for an individual to read the book’s entire 10 chapters. Careful consideration of those two reasons will make it clear that what’s in *The ABCs* is smack-dab in any school administrator’s wheelhouse. When I was writing it, I was well aware of the extraordinary impact that a skillful school administrator can have on the way children are educated. In my head, I was thinking chiefly about school-site administrators and central-office administrators. I thought then, and I still do, that if educational testing is ever to have an optimal impact on the quality of schooling, it will be necessary for school administrators to play a prominent role.

In a nutshell, the two reasons in Chapter 1’s rationale are: (1) too many evaluations of educational quality—both of schools and of teachers—stem from students’ scores on the *wrong* tests; (2) the formative-assessment process—a wonderful way of using classroom assessments to boost students’ learning—is being seriously underused in our schools. Well, although all five of *The ABCs*’ target audiences can profit from considering these two issues, school *administrators* can be profoundly guided by the way they come down on those issues. In a very definite way, then, the rationale for *The ABCs* meshes ideally with what school administrators must do to be successful.

With the enactment of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) in late 2015, many of the nation’s school administrators breathed a few sighs of relief. No longer would most schools and school districts be assigned a failing label as

called for by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) signed by President George W. Bush more than a dozen years earlier. It seemed, given ESSA's emphasis on greater state-level control, that evaluative flexibility was just around the corner. Yet, as federal regulations for state compliance with ESSA began to emerge, it became increasingly clear that, in one way or another, states that wished to be recipients of federal fiscal largesse would still be obliged to measure their students' levels of achievement with essentially identical accountability tests. As a consequence of these increasingly constraining federal requirements, the nation's school administrators will still be occupied with variations of high-stakes educational testing for some time to come.

If you're a principal (or assistant principal) of a school or if you're a central-office administrator, you can be almost certain that at least a healthy chunk of how you are *personally* evaluated will depend on the test scores earned by the students for whom you are responsible. ESSA, it appears, while allowing more state-level latitude in how test-influenced appraisals of schools are to be carried out, still calls for the use of students' test scores when evaluating its schools. Accordingly, if the wrong tests are being used to evaluate your particular schools' success, it is glaringly apparent that you need to understand the essentials of what sorts of educational assessments do that evaluative job well and what sorts of educational assessments don't.

The second reason trotted out in *The ABCs'* Chapter 1 for readers to learn about educational testing is that formative assessment, a scientifically confirmed process for helping students learn, is not being employed widely enough. Because the formative-assessment process focuses on the use of classroom tests to let teachers and/or students make an evidence-based decision about whether they need to adjust what they're doing, formative assessment can cause gigantic improvements in students' learning and in students' performance *on the right kinds of standardized tests*. Because your own effectiveness will be linked to the test performances of the

students under your charge, it would be foolhardy not to nurture the expanded use of formative assessment in your school(s). Chapter 8 in *The ABCs* deals solely with the nature and quality of the formative-assessment process.

In sum, although *The ABCs* was written for several categories of readers, the two-part rationale undergirding the writing of that book meshes marvelously with the mission of school administrators. Of particular relevance is the way in which the rationale for the book examines the way today's administrators are being evaluated—and in the way formative assessment can enhance students' learning.

ASSESSMENT LITERACY: ACQUIRE IT, ESPOUSE IT

I've watched the importance of educational testing blossom during my 60-plus year career in education. For the last several decades, unarguably, students' test scores have become the single, most important determinant of how successfully our nation's schools are thought to be performing. Students' performance on each state's annual accountability tests are released to the public, with at least mild fanfare, each year. We also see students' scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress employed to compare the effectiveness of schools in all of our states and among an ever-increasing array of our largest school districts. Moreover, we see American students' performances on international tests often stacked up against those of students across the globe.

School administrators today who know little about educational testing are almost certain to make major measurement-related mistakes themselves or, in the absence of sufficient measurement acumen, are likely to allow others to make measurement-linked mistakes. This is not an era wherein assessment ignorance on the part of a school administrator can be countenanced. If your knowledge regarding educational testing is not as solid as you wish it to be, I do so hope you will read *The ABCs* thoughtfully—so you can thoroughly

grasp its nine assessment-related understandings. If you do, I would certainly regard you as being “assessment literate,” and assessment literacy for *any* school administrator is a commodity much to be cherished these days.

However, once you *have* attained a reasonable level of assessment literacy, your job is not over. As you know, school administrators are—with warrant—presumed to be *leaders*. Here, then, is a clearly demarked domain in which you can lead those educators around you to master the chief assessment-related understandings that will help them do a better educational job. You can, in short, design and implement programs promoting assessment literacy for the educators whom you are supposed to lead.

What, exactly, is “assessment literacy?” Well, I’m sure you recognize that, over the years, different authorities have come up with different definitions of this concept. Because I’ve used the following definition in a number of my own writings on the topic, I am particularly fond of it:

Assessment literacy consists of an individual’s understandings of the fundamental assessment concepts and procedures deemed likely to influence educational decisions.

As you can see, assessment-literate people do not have to know *everything* about educational testing—only those concepts and procedures thought *likely to have an impact* on educational decisions. Well, this the sort of make-a-decision-difference approach to assessment literacy should make it easier for you to personally acquire the needed assessment-related understandings and, having done so, promote the mastery of such understandings by others. To illustrate, if you are a school-site administrator, then setting up programs to promote assessment literacy among your school’s teachers could be a real difference-maker in enhancing your school’s capabilities—and in getting your school’s performance judged accurately by the outside world. (Indeed empowering your

school's teachers' ability to interact knowledgeably about assessment with your students' parents will be seriously advantageous from a public-relations perspective.)

As you may already know, an *Online Supplement* to *The ABCs* is available at no charge and can readily function as a set of content and group (or solo) activities linked to each of the book's 10 chapters. If you serve as the leader of a professional learning community that meets periodically to consider the content of *The ABCs*, and I hope you will, I think you'll find what's in the *Online Supplement* to be of value to you and your colleagues. Because I wrote that supplement myself, at this juncture I am obliged to excuse myself from applauding its virtues too fervently. However, if what's in *The ABCs* itself, coupled with what's in the *Online Supplement*, are used as catalysts to induce a greater familiarity with the nine assessment-related understandings in *The ABCs*, I am confident that you'll be leading your colleagues in the right direction. Good luck in that assessment-literacy effort.

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