

Standardized tests are good if they are used correctly

WASHINGTON—The principal at this small Catholic girls' school was going over the test results of the latest achievement test.

Her students, she told the PTA gathering, were in the 80th percentile and better in reading, social studies and overall achievement, but only in the 60th in math—still comfortably above the national median 50, but still short of the school's general excellence.

"We'll have to do something about our math instruction," she observed matter-of-factly.

william raspberry

She took it as noncontroversial fact that the scores, which ranked her students against their counterparts across the country, told her something she needed to know about what was going on in her school.

The information was especially valuable because it came from outside the school. Her students' in-school math grades were no lower than their grades in other subjects. Had she relied solely on their classroom grades, she would never have known that there might be a problem in math instruction. The results of the standardized tests put her on notice.

I WAS REMINDED of a time several years back when a group of public school parents had to fight long and hard to get their principal to administer regular standardized tests. The parents had wanted to know how their children stacked up nationally, and also how they progressed from one year to the next. The tests, when they were finally administered on a regular basis, spotlighted some problems that might otherwise have gone undetected while, at the same time, reassuring parents that some very good things were going on in the school.

The divergent attitudes of the two principals are a mild illustration of the different ways different people regard standardized testing.

Some see the tests as a useful tool for evaluating instructional techniques. Others see them only as an unfair accusing finger.

The later viewpoint predominated at a recent forum on the truth-in-testing legislation now pending in the Congress.

The starkest expression of that view came from George Jackson of Howard University, who spoke as a representative of the Association of Black Psychologists, a group that has called for a moratorium on standardized testing.

"PSYCHOMETRIC TESTING is inherently racist," said Jackson. "There is very little difference between the thinking of Arthur Jensen (the Berkeley professor who, once again, is pushing his theory that blacks are genetically the intellectual inferiors of whites) and the rest of the testing industry."

Jackson and other panelists at the forum, held in conjunction with the Congressional Black Caucus weekend, were dismayed that blacks as a group score consistently

lower than whites on the standardized tests. They attributed that fact to the racism and insensitivity of the testing industry.

One panelist took a different tack.

Neither the proposed legislation nor most of the panelists "address the cause of lower minority scores," said Roscoe Brown, president of the Bronx Community College.

"Most tests penalize blacks and minorities because of the poor (pre-test) education they have received," he said. "And even after the performance differences are found, few additional resources are provided to help minority students overcome the effects of their inferior education."

BROWN'S POINT is that the culprit is not the test but the uses to which the test is put, and the response of educators to what the test tells them.

An analogy to medical tests buttresses the point. There is no use administering health-screening tests if there is no commitment to remedy the disorders the tests reveal. Standardized tests are useful in the same way that thermometers are useful: They reveal symptoms, but do not prescribe cures.

All the speakers were opposed to the use of test scores as the sole criterion for deciding who is admitted to college or graduate school. But Brown, unlike many of his fellow panelists, was unwilling to get rid of testing altogether.

"It is important that the (admissions) process be expanded to include other factors: Teacher recommendations, student background, initiative and so on," he said.

"But we mustn't forget that these other factors have, in the past, been used to exclude minority students. Thus there needs to be some objective standard."

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