

Summary of Floor Discussion

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In the discussion that closed the fourth session, participants raised three concerns regarding the use of standardized tests to assess student readiness to exit the public school system. First, standardized tests might lead some teachers to “teach to the test” rather than to teach material that would address broader educational goals. Second, the potential for racial or gender bias in standardized tests could make them an unfair indicator of a student’s competence. Third, because students cannot be forced to take them, standardized tests would do little to solve the more fundamental problem of motivating students to remain in school.

The discussion opened with the suggestion that teachers in states with a long history of using standardized exit exams are more likely to teach to the test. Some participants responded that gearing instruction toward an exam is not necessarily a bad strategy. Julian Betts noted that, according to Richard Murnane, the first step toward implementing the type of standards proposed by Rudy Crew, the National Council of Teachers, and others is to make the tests themselves more interesting. To accomplish this goal, Betts suggested designing tests that assess mathematical, analytical, and writing ability through written responses rather than multiple-choice answers. Such tests would encourage students to think and synthesize information rather than to simply memorize facts. Betts commented that once tests like these were in place, educators would be free to teach to the test because the tests would reflect the school system’s underlying educational standards.

Participants then raised a second issue relating to test design: even if the format was changed so that standardized tests no longer encouraged rote memorization, the potential for gender and racial bias would remain. Betts offered some suggestions for minimizing this type of bias. He noted that test writers have already invested substantial resources in trying to write questions that tap into the general knowledge of all students. In addition, Betts suggested that the poor performance of a particular ethnic group on a standardized test does not necessarily indicate that the test is biased. The test results, he noted, are often correlated with measures of success such as earnings later in life. Thus, the scores have been measuring something important about how well our education system is working for certain groups.

Finally, participants expressed the view that the presenters’ comments on standards and testing often failed to address the more practical problems facing educators today. As one educator pointed out, the opinion that exit exams give students an incentive to work harder overlooks the fact that students can choose truancy instead; simply telling an unmotivated student that he or she has to take a test is not going to change an underlying attitude of indifference. From this educator’s point of view, we need to devise new ways of making the classroom more exciting; students must be able to see the relevance of what they are learning so that they will choose to stay in school. Unless this change occurs, the educator continued, exit exams

would do little to help save the students who are falling through the cracks. Another participant added that exit exams may be only part of the solution—requiring students to pass exams to gain post-high-school jobs may be a better way to create incentives to stay in school.

Betts responded that he was not suggesting that policymakers simply raise standards and sit back and let the problems work themselves out. Instead, he advocated using the results of standardized tests (as opposed to letter grades, which can introduce a fair amount of subjectivity to the evaluation process) as a guide in targeting more resources to the students who are experiencing the most difficulty. Betts and Derek Neal used the Chicago public

school system as an example of a program in which exit exams did seem to improve student performance. Betts and Neal also noted that while no program is going to help every student, the success of the Chicago program suggests that the implementation of exit standards is worthwhile. Asked about the use of entrance exams, Betts offered the opinion that both entrance and exit exams would be useful; however, more pressing is the underlying need to ensure that every student possesses basic mathematical and reading skills. Exit exams, in particular, seem to be an effective and direct way to assess our success in meeting educational goals.

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