



Institute for Public School Initiatives
The College of EDUCATION
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Accounting for Productivity

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To measure public school performance, many states are now implementing new, rigorous standards with aligned, standardized tests in English language arts and mathematics. At the same time, there is concern about the overuse of standardized tests and the need to shift resources away from traditional test preparation. Too often, discussions about the volume and type of tests that are appropriate to measure how well schools are doing are based on unproven theories, untested assessments, and outcomes that bear little relationship to students' future success. Arguments over school accountability seem to focus on the testing rather than learning, on measurement mechanics rather than student results.

While there is general agreement that schools should provide an opportunity for all students to perform, there is little agreement on just what constitutes good performance. Frequently, efforts for school improvement focus on identifying and improving performance of students who fail to achieve minimum test scores, the lowest common denominator of academic performance. If good performance means only minimizing the number of students who fail tests, the focus on testing is understandable.

Wouldn't it be better if schools were held accountable for more than minimum test scores? As an alternative, imagine an accountability system flipped upside down: one that recognizes the highest common denominator, student success after completing school.

After investing 12 or more years of their lives on basic education, students should graduate from high school prepared to succeed in additional education or training, take their place in society and climb a career ladder aligned to labor market demands. Looking at the society of the future, to succeed in their lives, many students will need to complete two- and four-year degrees. Preparing students for that future is the real public education challenge.

Certainly, it is important to know how well schools are preparing students academically, and some amount of standardized testing is critical. No reliable evaluation of school performance can occur without standardized measurement. Experience tells us, however, that high marks on standardized tests alone do not predict positive student outcomes. Test results represent only a portion of the necessary information needed to know how schools are doing. In the final analysis of performance, the number of students produced who are ready to succeed in life is the real measure. Real accountability is an educational productivity issue.

In an educational productivity model, the educators' task is to direct efforts and allocate resources to maximize opportunities for all students upon graduation. Accountability shifts from compliance to accomplishment, from minimizing failure to recognizing success. A productivity model involves a systematic analysis of student performance after high school, the use of the post high school performance data to modify curriculum and instruction, and, then, an analysis of the impact of the modifications on student performance after high school. The obvious public interest goal is to recognize as accountable schools who produce successful graduates, identify what works, and to encourage less productive schools to emulate the success of others.

Wouldn't this be more effective than merely reducing the test failure rate?

About the Authors

Dr. James Lanich holds a doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction from USC. He is a former public school teacher and administrator. He led the Core Curriculum Services for the Los Angeles County Superintendent of Schools and developed the Academic Achievement Alliance. He was the first Director and principal architect for the Inaugural Broad Prize for Urban Education. Dr. Lanich is the founder, President, and CEO of both the Campaign for Business and Education Excellence and the Education Results Partnership.

Dr. Darvin Winick is a founding Director of The Institute for Productivity in Education and the Executive Director of The Institute for Public School Initiatives in The College of Education at the University of Texas in Austin. He served as Chair of the National Assessment Governing Board and advisor to the 12th Grade Preparedness Commission. Dr. Winick has served as advisor to three U.S. Secretaries of Education and four Texas Governors. He helped organize and manage the Texas Business and Education Coalition. Dr. Winick holds a doctorate in Organizational Psychology from Purdue University.

The Institute for Public School Initiatives (IPSI) solves education's complex problems by building strategic partnerships with agencies, foundations, business leaders, and associations. Launched in 2004, the Institute is known for its innovative statewide solutions that increase student achievement and teacher and school effectiveness.



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