As parents of children in public schools can verify, students are being tested more often than ever.

In Tennessee, testing was expanded last school year to include more items in reading, language arts and mathematics. In this upcoming school year, testing also will include social studies and science. Beginning with last year’s freshman class, all students entering high school are required to pass demanding tests in mathematics, science and language arts to earn a high school diploma.

In Georgia, expanded testing began in 2000, and now students in grades one through eight are tested in reading, English, language arts and math. Last year, tests in science and social studies were added for grades three through eight. Georgia just dropped a plan for students to pass tests at the end of certain courses to earn a high school diploma, but an earlier test for high school graduation remains in place.

Public Schools in both states will shortly be publicizing the results of most of these tests for entire schools and by racial, ethnic, income and disability groups of students within each school. Schools receiving federal funds face consequences, such as having to let students transfer to another public school, if the test scores do not reach certain minimum levels prescribed by the states. These last changes have come about because of the No Child Left Behind Act, a new national policy approved by Congress and President Bush in 2002.

Will all this increased testing lead to better schools and more knowledgeable students? Will this new accountability improve education?

Yes, testing and accountability can help – but only as two components of a comprehensive strategy to improve student learning. In other words, we can’t stop halfway once tests and consequences for not meeting standards are put in place.

School reform based on academic standards, student tests and additional accountability can clarify what students ought to know and institute tests that measure whether students have learned this academic content. Accountability measures also can prod schools, teachers and students to concentrate on what is important for young people to learn to have a productive and fulfilling life.

These elements, though, are only part of a formula for success.

More testing and consequences for not raising test scores make sense only if teachers receive adequate preparation and support to teach what is expected – especially because the content of the subject matter is often more difficult than what was taught before. Further, students who do not make the grade must be given extra assistance to do better because more is being asked of them.

Many of our political and business leaders do not talk about the need for this type of support for teachers and students when they make demands on them for better performance. It is almost as if many leaders believe that all they have to do to make test scores rise is to pound the table harder.

If students and teachers are not helped to do better, this way to improve the schools will not achieve its desired results.

The country’s big-city school districts are learning this lesson. In a March report, the Council of Great City Schools noted that urban districts were making marked
improvements in math and reading scores and attributed these gains to a combination of factors – “high standards, strong and stable leadership, better teaching, more instructional time, regular assessments, stronger accountability and efficient management.” Notice that high academic standards, more testing and greater accountability are only three of the seven factors identified for success. Better teaching and more instructional time are also essential for students and teachers to do better. And, leadership and efficient management are necessary to keep the schools on track.

The point is, there are no easy solutions. Demands for more testing and greater accountability will not work on their own – but they can make a difference if they are part of a comprehensive approach to improving schools.

So, parents should be supportive of more tests and of state and federal efforts to identify schools that do not raise test scores but on the condition that schools and students receive help and are not just penalized. Since many politicians and business leaders seem to be willing to stop their work on school reform after they institute tests and set the penalties, it is up to parents, teachers and other citizens to insist on a full package of school improvement.

These are the questions we all ought to ask about test-based reform:

- **To teachers:** Are you receiving what you need to effectively teach the subjects you are assigned to teach?
- **To principals and school superintendents:** Are kids who are not doing well being given extra time and attention so they can improve?
- **To business leaders:** Are you willing to support efforts to provide schools with sufficient funds to enable teachers and students to reach higher goals?
- **To School board members:** Are you ensuring stable leadership in the schools and efficient management of the funds entrusted to you for the education of our children?
- **To elected leaders:** Are you providing the schools what they need to meet the higher demands of new academic standards and tests?
- **To parents:** Are you taking responsibility for your children’s education by keeping contact with the school and holding your children accountable for academic work?
- **To all citizens:** Are all of us doing enough to help in the education of the next generation? Are we willing to support bond issues and higher taxes if they help the schools? Do we show respect to teachers and appreciation to them for what they are doing?

Our schools are getting better, but we all share responsibility for improving education. More test results and more lists of “failing schools” are only indicators of a situation, not the solution to the problem.

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