



Do Standardized Tests Work

January 7, 2004

I want you to take a simple true/false test today. The question is: Do standardized tests improve student performance?

This is a very important question, since the U.S. has now embarked upon a huge initiative to improve performance through testing. This year congress passed the President's education reform program, called No Child Left Behind, or NCLB. Among other things, NCLB requires states to meet ambitious targets for student improvement and for the hiring of qualified teachers. With their current budgetary pressures, many states are complaining that they cannot meet the standards and are calling for delays or the scrapping of NCLB. Instead, many states and educators are calling for more money, not more testing. But the fact is that congress enacted NCLB at the President's request because of the failure of tens of billions of dollars of federal spending on education to make any measurable improvement in student learning.

NCLB requires states to set academic standards in English and math and to devise tests to objectively measure progress according to student's performance on those same tests. While this sounds great in theory, the initial results of NCLB testing resulted in almost every school in the country failing, including most Florida schools - this despite the state's history of testing for performance. Nevertheless, the preliminary results also demonstrated that states such as Florida, Texas and North Carolina that set clear standards and test for those standards do produce significant improvement in student performance. And it is worth noting that Florida, Texas and North Carolina all spend less than the national average per student, so it can't be just a matter of spending.

That said, spending does count too. The latest research shows that qualified teachers produce the best results. By 2006 NCLB requires all teachers to be "highly qualified," meaning that teachers must not only be certified but must also be highly conversant in their subject matter. It will cost a lot of money to reach

this goal, especially in Florida. The class size amendment coupled with NCLB will force the state to spend much more per student.

As I have previously predicted, this will require an increase in the state sales tax to fund the program. Interestingly, opinion polls indicate that most Floridians would support such a tax. And testing is no small part of the reason why. Voters feel that testing and holding schools accountable for their products-educated students-makes the sacrifice of higher taxes worth paying.

This is Hank Fishkind for 90.7 FM, WMFE News.

Fishkind and Associates, Inc.