

Standards and assessment; the time is now

by Bambi Betts

The debate about standards and testing seems endless. Principals in international and other private schools have no choice but to have an opinion. Do you lead a school toward clear learning standards, toward external testing of those standards, toward teacher evaluation based on student performance on standards?

The starting point for making these decisions is always the same: the core beliefs and philosophy your school holds about teaching and learning.

Many of our international schools are operating with premises or beliefs such as these:

1. An effective school lays out learning goals (standards) for students in a written curriculum.
2. The role of the teacher is to provide students with ample opportunities to reach those goals.
3. The assessment tools used to evaluate progress toward the goals should be designed to be excellent measures of the achievement of the curricular goals.
4. The student, the parent, the teacher and the school community should have good information about whether students are meeting those goals.
5. The principals and teachers should be able to use the data about achievement of those goals to improve the teaching process.
6. Teachers and administrators should have some level of accountability for students meeting curricular goals.

While many schools would agree to these premises, it is the next step which often eludes us: designing a fully aligned curriculum, assessment and reporting process. Unfortunately without these pieces in place, the question of how best to assess student learning externally becomes impossible to answer.

The most common refrain we hear from teachers and administrators about standardized, external tests is that they fail to assess students on the curricular standards set forth by the school. There is little alignment between what students learn at the school and the external assessment tools used to measure their learning.

So educators are arguing that there is no place for standardized testing. All the data we need about student learning can come from the school itself. Politicians claim there is an essential place for such testing and that the data generated from within a school is not sufficient for true accountability. And that it's too expensive to design and use tools which might actually match the learning goals of the schools.

If we accept the premise that schools should be held accountable for student learning, the question is not whether to assess students by some external tool; the question is what assessment tool will give us real, usable data about truly essential learning goals.

Educators and politicians have long agreed that skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking, application of knowledge and the ability to work in teams are essential to both individual success as well as a prosperous society. Yet we fail to design "standardized" assessment tools which collect this kind of data about our learners. And we even fail to dialogue about it.

Eight billion dollars has recently been allocated to develop standardized tests, for example, in the US. We have yet to see discussion about making those into truly useful tools. Unless and until we are willing to take up this challenge, the standardized test will remain a bone of contention rather than a strong vehicle for educating students.

And oddly, there are actually models that work which the US is either blinded to or deliberately ignores. Some countries such as the UK have made inroads to developing assessments, which are aligned with curriculum, and go beyond the bubble test model. (Of course they HAVE a curriculum unlike the US) Is it more expensive? Of course. But if education really is the agenda, eight billion seems plenty to open this dialogue.

International schools are not immune to this discussion. We, too, are (or should be) moving forward on the accountability continuum. It is in the best interest of our students if we begin to weigh in on this issue and consider what an international, standardized assessment scheme might look like.

By now we are all well aware that, like it or not, what gets tested gets learned, or at least taught. If we want problem-solvers and innovators to emerge from our systems, and some substantial way to prove that's happening, we need to get moving on creating standardized assessment tools which do the job.