

EDUCATION DAILY

The education community's independent daily news service

ASSESSMENTS

Commission recommends new assessment approach

By Frank Wolfe

The final report of the Gordon Commission on the Future of Assessment in K-12 Education recommends that policymakers in the Obama administration and Congress develop a new approach to assessment as a means to improve instruction, rather than as a static, momentary measurement tool to hold schools and teachers accountable for performance.

“It is recommended that the president and Congress consider various models to encourage experimentation with different approaches to assessment and accountability,” according to the final report issued this month.

“In reauthorizing ESEA, the Obama administration should press for funds to incentivize states and assessment companies to experiment with radically different forms of assessments, including challenging performance tasks that better represent the learning activities that will help students develop the competencies they will need to succeed in the 21st century.”

The chairman of the commission, Edmund Gordon, a renowned educational psychologist and professor emeritus at Yale University and Columbia University, has held that standardized testing for accountability purposes is the “least powerful use of assessment tools in education.” The new report asserts that quality assessments provide timely information to help students learn better and to aid teachers in personalizing instruction.

“The primary purpose of assessment ought to be to inform and improve teaching and learning,” Gordon said.

The commission also advised the creation of a permanent Council on Educational Assessments, modeled on the Education Commission of the States, and the establishment of a 10-year research effort to strengthen assessments by the Education Department, the National Science Foundation, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development and the private sector.

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DATA QUALITY

Coordinated data systems drive school improvement

By Adam Dolge

Initiatives and programs designed to improve student outcomes will likely have little impact if schools don't constantly review data and use it to coordinate reform efforts.

That's the philosophy at Chicago Public Schools. Its 427 schools, governed by five regional networks, constantly use data when creating and implementing school improvement plans, and they are supported by the district with frequent comprehensive meetings.

Randel Josserand, deputy chief of schools, said during a recent webinar hosted by the School Turnaround Learning Community that it's not uncommon for schools to add on new reform initiatives when they identify an area that needs improvement.

At one CPS high school, for example, there were 21 interventions designed to improve student attendance but even the principal and staff didn't know about all the programs. They all cost money and many were not effective, Josserand said.

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The district helped put a school project plan in place and worked with school and teacher leaders on implementation.

Schools across the country have similar challenges in utilizing data to boost school improvement. During the webinar, Josserand outlined CPS' approach to data. While CPS is the third-largest district in the country, this system is easily replicated for suburban and rural districts.

Below is Josserand's advice for effectively using data to drive student progress and boost school performance.

- **School improvement planning.** Examine readiness, gather and analyze school-wide data, and prioritize and set goals based on student needs. This work is facilitated by the district at CPS.

Administrators set goals for student achievement and work with schools on how to achieve them. Josserand said other LEAs may use a different system but CPS thinks setting schools' goals is the most effective method for such a large district.

- **Set up the basic structures.** CPS also looks at how the school is organized for school improvement. Do they have the basic structures in place? If not, then the district needs to help put them in place.

For example, principals should understand the importance of school improvement.

- **Tiered system of student support.** CPS has a three-tier system of support that depends on students' needs. School improvement plans should address all students and plans should also address those that need moderate and more intensive supports.

- **Tie all reform efforts to goals and student metrics.** Everything should be focused and aligned to a goal. It could be improving student achievement, ACT averages, graduation rate, and post-secondary enrollment. Vendors and outside partners should be aligned with goals as well.

- **Ensure money is well spent.** There are plenty of initiatives that have a great impact on addressing student outcome metrics, but others may do little to meet a school's goal. Make sure every dollar is aligned to a student outcome metric.

With tight budgets, it's especially important to ensure all dollars are spent on programs that make a difference.

In addition, philanthropists that want to help fund a program will want data at their fingertips before making an investment.

- **Align leading indicators and fidelity metrics.** Instead of waiting until the end of year to see how well initiatives address student metrics, try aligning data systems to leading indicators that measure progress throughout the year.

In addition, fidelity metrics, which are things not related to student outcomes, should be traced. It's important, for example, to see attendance rates of programs in addition the impact on grades.

- **Hold regular school improvement meetings around data.** This work may seem complicated, so it's important to ensure school and district staff and leaders have access to supports.

CPS holds a series of strategic meetings, lasting about 15-20 minutes, where all key decision-makers look at initiatives and programs tied to student metrics. The meetings could be held over the phone once a week.

It's important all key decision-makers are present, like budget and transportation coordinators. These meetings allow school-level personnel to work with district officials and address any areas of concern.

- **Spotlight reports.** During these regular meetings, each initiative is examined and assigned a green light if it's working well, a yellow light if there are potential concerns, and a red light if there are problems that need to be addressed right away.

District and school officials work together to correct any problems that arise.

The webinar is archived at <http://www.schoolturnaroundsupport.org/node/5705>.



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Lawmaker questions schools' role in identifying mentally ill

By Mark W. Sherman

After the shootings last year at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., the Obama administration proposed several steps to help prevent such incidents.

Project AWARE, for example, would help teachers look for signs of mental illness among their students and strengthen relationships between schools and community mental health providers.

But at a March 20 hearing on children's mental health, a GOP lawmaker questioned both the ability and authority of schools to act as arbiters of children's mental health.

"One of the things that your testimony has said is that schools would identify, but I don't think schools or school counselors, [no matter what the ratio of counselors to children], have that ability to truly identify kids," said Rep. Jack Kingston, R-Ga., chairman of the House Appropriations Committee's Labor, HHS, Education panel.

Kingston was speaking to Pamela Hyde, head of the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, and Deborah Delisle, head of the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.

"So can you comment on that," he continued, "because you sure don't want to misdiagnose it and plant some seed that, well, you drew a weird picture, therefore, you got a problem."

Hyde said there was no desire to find problems where none exist.

"We don't want to identify children that don't need help. What we know, though, is that there are a number of children who do need help and don't get identified."

But the exchange illustrated the difficulty of finding consensus on how best to respond to the shootings at Sandy Hook as well as the less publicized violence that children suffer every day.

It is not clear, therefore, how far the Obama administration will get with its proposals, quite apart from any changes to gun laws.

Invoking theory of limited government

The exchange between Kingston and Hyde started with Kingston's recollection of a conversation with a child psychologist in the wake of the 1999 shootings at Columbine (Colo.) High School.

"There was just a tremendous growth in his industry, because he said any time a child drew a weird picture, the mom would bring him in and say, 'Is he is the next Dylan Klebold?'" he said,

referring to one of the shooters.

Kingston's contact said he might indeed find reason for concern but might also say, "No, this is a kid being a kid," Kingston said.

That's what trained professionals are for, Hyde said.

"We know that sometimes behaviors are a part of young people's growing up, but we also know that sometimes those behaviors do identify young people with needs that are not getting attended to," she said.

But Kingston then questioned the merit of letting schools try to make such distinctions, even if they were capable of doing so.

"Well, who would have the power" to identify children with mental health problems, he said. "Coming at it for a minute from a libertarian standpoint, how would the state be given that power?"

Libertarianism is a theory of limited government that is distinct from conventional Republican thinking, although its adherents often belong to the GOP.

Maintaining a division of labor

Kingston then raised the specter of a teacher using the power to refer a student for mental health services as a way to get back at a student, as if they were adversaries.

"You don't like the child, the child's belligerent or whatever and so you say, 'You can test them and counsel them,'" he said. "Teachers aren't perfect, the teachers — often they have their own axe to grind on the child, and [so I] would have some concern about the state having the power to be able to send somebody off."

Kingston's concerns have their parallels in the special ed field. For example, the IDEA requires states to monitor LEAs to make sure children from certain racial or ethnic groups are not being overidentified, either in special ed as a whole or within particular disability categories, such as emotional disturbance.

But Hyde assured Kingston that the administration does not want teachers to act outside their purview, that it merely wants to give them more to go on.

"We're not suggesting that anyone who is not trained, licensed, and able to make those assessments do that," she said. "What we're trying to do is raise awareness, for example, [around] suicidality and other kinds of things that may indicate a need for professional help, rather than trying to get teachers to be diagnosticians. That's not what we're trying to accomplish."

Across the Nation

New Jersey Gov. Christie signs bill to create special ed task force

A bill aimed at streamlining special education programs in New Jersey's public schools was signed March 18 by Republican Governor Chris Christie, *Wall (N.J.) Patch* reported.

A.B.1365 would establish a task force to study various issues related to improving special education programs and services for public school students. The task force would be comprised of the state education commissioner and 16 governor-appointed members, including parents, teachers, administrators, and special ed advocates, according to the bill.

The bill states the task force would examine issues including, but not limited to:

- The evaluation of practices for classifying and educating students who are eligible for special education.
- The development of best practices for education professionals working with students who require special education.
- Strategies to reduce the costs associated with the placement of eligible students in out-of-district public schools or private schools, including the development of in-district special education programs and services.
- The development of standards and appropriate oversight to ensure that programs and services address the needs of students, focus on student achievement, and assess the effectiveness of programs and services.

The task force has 180 days after it organizes to present its findings and recommendations, according to the bill.

The bill was sponsored by Assemblyman Dave Rible, R-Monmouth and Ocean, and cleared both houses of the state Legislature by unanimous votes earlier this year, *Patch* said.

Resource

DOI releases 21st century strategic plan

The U.S. Department of the Interior's Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics Education and Employment Pathways Strategic Plan: Fiscal Years 2013-2018 presents the agency's vision for a 21st century workforce that reflects the diversity of the nation, optimizes youth engagement throughout its programs, promotes sustainable operations, and applies effective and efficient management.

The plan seeks to support a science-literate public and to prepare students and professionals from all backgrounds to understand and value the role of science and science inquiry in the stewardship of America's natural resources and cultural heritage.

The department plans to address the following key strategic areas:

- Facilitate access to coordinated DOI resources.
- Engage students and citizens.
- Support educators.
- Strengthen career training and workforce development.

For more information, visit www.doi.gov/whatwedo/youth/education.cfm

ASSESSMENTS

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"The globalization of the economy, advancements in technology, the development of the Internet, and the explosion of social media and other communication platforms have changed the nature of what it means to be well-educated and competent in the 21st century," according to the report. "Digital technologies have empowered individuals in multiple ways, enabling them to express themselves, gather information easily, make informed choices, and organize themselves into networks for a variety of purposes. New assessments — both external and internal to classroom use — must fit squarely into this landscape of the future."

Assessment progress

While the Gordon Commission's report praised the work of the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and the Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium, the study said that the progress made by PARCC and SBAC in assessment development "will be far from what is ultimately needed for either accountability or classroom instructional improvement purposes."

The consortia's new assessments, to be in place next year, have only added to the stress

on teachers, one union official said recently at a Center for American Progress forum on teacher evaluation.

"I imagine from a teacher's perspective, your nightmare is being in a train yard and all you can do is move from one track to another, and on each track you see a different oncoming train," said Marla Ucelli-Kashyap, an assistant to Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers. "On one track, it's teaching to the Common Core. On another track, it's the assessments, which I know are coming next year, but I don't know what they look like. Then I jump to the next track and it's my evaluation system which is impacted by all those things."

John Deasy, the superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, who has proposed making 30 percent of a teacher's evaluation based on raw test scores, said that the federal sequestration process could especially hurt professional development for mid-career and senior teachers through Title II dollars.

"A lot of that support has come through federal money," Deasy said at the CAP event.

The Gordon Commission report is available at www.gordoncommission.org/rsc/pdfs/gordon-commission_public_policy_report.pdf.