Standards and Testing

Where Does Place-Based Learning Fit In?

By Alison Yaunches

Standards. Assessment. Accountability. These words can sound daunting even to the most seasoned place-based educator. However, in today’s education environment they are a daily reality, and so practitioners must find ways to take the two seemingly opposite concepts of place-based curriculum and state-imposed standards and link them together.

Three programs in three different states involved with the Rural Trust’s portfolio design team process have been able to take their innovative strategies in teaching and curriculum and demonstrate the quantitative power of place-based education. These sites have proven the credibility of place-based education in meeting or even exceeding state standards. One site using place-based education has shown improvement in students’ high-stakes test scores. From opposite corners of the map, organizations representing the states of Louisiana, Vermont and Wyoming are proving that place-based education can easily walk hand-in-hand with state-imposed standards, high-stakes tests and accountability.

East Feliciana Parish Schools, Louisiana

A case of using place-based learning to tackle state standards and testing

In the rolling hills 30 miles north of the Louisiana state capital of Baton Rouge, sits the East Feliciana Parish (Louisiana’s equivalent of a county). Spanish for “happy land,” East Feliciana is an area of limited resources and multiple educational challenges. The parish is one of the poorest in the state, and serves approximately 3,000 students, 79 percent of whom are African-American. Forty-two percent of parish residents do not have a high school diploma.

It was in this environment that an initiative dubbed Project Connect was launched to address the parish’s historically low test scores in science and math. With high-stakes testing in grades 4, 8,
February 24–27, 2002
Strengthening Communities: Enhancing Extension’s Role
Orlando Airport Marriott Hotel, Orlando, Florida
This first national Cooperative Extension conference will bring together Extension professionals from across the system to share resources and information related to community resources and economic development programming. Seven program area tracks will be covered: economic development, community decision making, education and workforce development, information technology, local government education, land and natural resources use, and community services.

The registration fee is $175 and does not include room and board. Contact the Southern Rural Development Center at (662) 325-3207 for more information, or go to their website at http://ext.msstate.edu/srdc.

March 8, 2002
Schools as Caring Communities: Learning and Leading by Engaging the Public
Marriott Riverwalk Hotel, San Antonio, TX
This is one of many institutes held a day before ASCD’s (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development) annual conference. If teachers, parents, and other members of your learning community ever question the role your school plays in creating a caring community, here’s an opportunity to think more deeply about this issue and learn how to engage others in constructive discourse about community priorities for public education.

This institute will challenge you to take a closer look at: what role your school should play in promoting the larger well-being of residents; how to organize a “town meeting” for the purpose of opening a dialogue between residents and school district stakeholders; why you should focus on creating a sustainable, long-term agenda; and how to initiate a public engagement project in your community. The institute is $229 (ASCD members)/$279 (nonmembers).

The ASCD conference, Choosing to Dance: Taking Bold Steps for the Sake of Our Children, will be held from March 9–11, 2002. Go to ASCD’s website at www.ascd.org or call (800) 933-2723 for more information on the conference and institutes, or to register for both.

March 7–9, 2002
No Child Left Behind: The Vital Role of Rural Schools
John Ascuaga’s Nugget Hotel, Reno, Nevada
This conference is especially valuable for educators, pre-service educators, administrators, service providers, parents, and policy makers who would like to share information on special education, and address critical issues affecting the delivery of services for individuals with disabilities living in rural areas. More information will be available in the coming months.

Contact Judy Weyrauch at the American Conference on Rural Special Education (ACRES) headquarters at (785) 532-2737 or acres@ksu.edu for more information.

March 15–17, 2002
25th Annual Appalachian Studies Conference
Unicoi State Park, Helen, Georgia
Entitled Voices from the Margins, Living on the Fringe, this conference will feature special sessions on Hispanic, African-American and Cherokee communities, as well as women and girls, gays and lesbians, prisoners and others from the outskirts or margins of Appalachia. There will be a pre-conference tour of the John C. Campbell Folk School and the usual panels, films, readings, dancing and fashion show.

Preliminary program and registration materials will be available by early January on the Appalachian Studies website, www.appalachianstudies.org. Room reservations at Unicoi are available now on their website. Contact Patricia Beaver, (828) 262-4089, beaverpd@appstate.edu for further information.

To list your upcoming events in the February 2002 newsletter please contact Rural Roots at editor@ruraledu.org or call (202) 955-7177, ext. 13.
Wallace-Reader’s Digest Funds Award Grant for School Leadership

The Wallace-Reader’s Digest Funds has awarded a planning grant of $50,000 to the Rural Trust for a new initiative to improve rural school leadership in the “Black Belt” states of Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi. With this grant, the Rural Trust will create a working group of rural principals and superintendents to design a plan for professional leadership development in rural areas.

Ultimately, the Rural Trust hopes to strengthen the abilities of rural school superintendents and principals to improve student learning and teacher quality, and create a network of support, mentoring and training for rural school leaders.

“In addition to lacking quality professional development programs, school leaders in the rural Black Belt often face obstacles of isolation, low professional pay and scarce resources,” said Rural Trust President Rachel Tompkins. “This grant will help rural principals and superintendents overcome these obstacles by working together at the state and regional level to get the help they need to improve rural schools.”

The grant was awarded as part of the Wallace-Reader’s Digest Funds’ Ventures in Leadership program, whose goal is to help nonprofit organizations and public schools around the country test innovative ideas for improving educational leadership.

Ramirez Joins Rural Trust

Francisco Ramirez joined the Rural Trust as the Director of Finance and Administration in October 2001, after eight years as the Chief Financial Officer at the International Youth Foundation, where he was in charge of financial, administrative and human resources affairs. Prior to that, he worked in a variety of management positions at the International Planned Parenthood Federation in both New York City and London for 17 years.

A native Chilean, Ramirez has a wealth of experience working with 501(c)(3) organizations and handling multi-million dollar budgets. He is on the Board of Directors of both the Maryland Association of Nonprofit Organizations and the Multiple Sclerosis Association of America. Ramirez is a fluent Spanish speaker, with working knowledge of Portuguese, Italian and French.

New Volume of Oral History

Voices of the Valley, Volume III is now available from North Coast Rural Challenge Network’s (NRCRN) Anderson Valley site. The book, which includes a CD of recorded oral histories, is a continuation of earlier volumes focusing on student interviews with Anderson Valley Elders. Contact Mitch Mendosa at (707) 895-2199 or mmendosa@avusd.k12.ca.us to order.

Survey of Rural Americans Finds Participants Rating Quality of Life High

In a national survey conducted by the Pew Partnership for Civic Change entitled Voices of Rural America, over three-quarters of rural residents surveyed rate the quality of life in their community as either excellent or good. Running counter to common perceptions of isolation and real physical detachment, rural residents were more likely to feel connected to their communities than urban residents and equally optimistic about their community’s prospects for the future. Eighty percent of those surveyed indicated that they feel their community’s best years might lie ahead. For more survey results, go to www.pew-partnership.org.

A Box of Tea to Support California Taoist Temple

Inspired by Mendocino High School students, who traced their community’s Chinese history and became advocates for the restoration of their local Taoist Kwan Tai Temple, the Thanksgiving Coffee Company created its Kwan Tai Temple Tea. With each purchase of this Oolong tea, a portion of the proceeds will go to the temple in Mendocino, California for preservation and educational programs. To order, contact Loretta McCoard via e-mail at lmcoard@mcn.org; to learn more about the temple and preservation efforts, go to www.kwaintaitemple.org. The box of tea is $8.00, which includes shipping and handling.
A Light Shining on Learning That Happens Within the Context of Community

By Ginny Jaramillo

In the Spring of 1999, our school was invited by the Rural Trust to participate in the design of a portfolio assessment process that would broaden the scope of school assessment to include both student and community learning and contributions, student voice, and the deepening and spreading of place-based instruction. As network members of the Rural Trust, we were already familiar with the place-based work being done in more than 700 sites throughout the nation, and we were eager to help find a way to develop high-quality assessment tools for such important work. In fact, the experience turned out to be far more valuable than any of us had imagined.

Having spent the last seven years as administrator of Guffey School, a Pre-K-8 charter grade school with an enrollment of 34 in the Pike Wilderness area of Colorado, I am familiar with the frustration of developing decent tools for assessing learning, particularly in small, rural schools. The State of Colorado, for example, recently developed a criterion-referenced test, called the Colorado State Assessment Program (CSAP). It is an expensive, but very well designed test that measures student competency in three areas of student performance, while the state mandates that schools are, in fact, responsible for 12 areas of student performance, (and local school boards include additional standards of performance that reflect local values). Second, schools with very small enrollments, such as ours, yield insignificant data because the number of students is not sufficient to give an accurate statistical analysis. Third, relying on a single measure to evaluate the success of schools is a dangerous journey toward the politics of schooling and away from the meaningful assessment of learning.

As in other schools rooted in place-based instruction, our students have achieved learning goals that far exceed the “basics” of math, reading and writing. Equally important, our communities have benefited from the place-based projects that are flourishing at our schools. Although we appreciated the one measure that the state offered us for assessing student learning, clearly we were desperate for more comprehensive assessment of the depth and breadth of our work.

In March 2000, with 11 other Rural Trust network sites from across the nation, and under the consultation of staff members from Harvard University, we gathered in Omaha, Nebraska to tackle a task that turned out to be far more complex than any of us anticipated. We started by studying a draft of a rubric that had been created by the Rural Trust staff in consultation with the Harvard staff, based on the work that had been accomplished throughout Rural Trust sites.

The rubric identified nine principles and four “levels of performance” that described how the work would look at different levels of development. We were asked to go back and spend some time at our sites to consider what could be included in a portfolio of evidence that would demonstrate where our sites might rate on those nine principles.

One of the most unique circumstances of the process, and one that was clearly ground-breaking was that the “experts” were not telling us how to assess our work. Rather, we were being invited into a partnership that included staff, students, and community members from our sites, as well as Harvard researchers and Rural Trust staff. We were embarking on a research project that engaged all the players in the learning process as “experts.”

When we met again in Omaha in July 2000, each site shared their resultant “portfolios.” There was so much evidence presented by each site that most of us required several suitcases to lug all of it with us. It was quickly clear to all of us that we had not yet learned how to select truly “rich” evidence, how to overcome the desire to “show off” our work, or how to sharpen our portfolios to focus on specific issues such as student learning, community contributions, or student voice.

For the 2000–2001 school year, the team tried a new approach. This time six of the original design team sites agreed to continue the work, and five new sites were added. We committed to quarterly national meetings, as well as ongoing work at the site level. The Rural Trust contracted with the Educational Testing Service (ETS) to partner with us, in addition to the continued consultation with Harvard University. Our approach to the process was to first rebuild the rubric, with four “entries” identified as: 1) Student Learning and Contributions, 2) Community Learning and Contributions, 3) Deepening and Spreading the Work, and 4) Student Voice. Our team tackled the first three entries, leaving the fourth entry, student voice, to be developed in partnership with a group of Rural Trust students from across the nation.

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Once we built a draft rubric for the three entries, each site selected an entry that they wanted to focus on, and then worked with other sites that had selected that same entry. With the help of the ETS staff, we learned to put aside our fears of being misunderstood or judged by “outsiders,” and turned our attention to studying evidence to carefully determine whether or not it truly offered the information necessary for indicating growth. At the same time, we revised the rubric constantly as we learned what made sense, what was left out, what was repeated, or what was unclear. Throughout the course of the year, we spent time at our sites with teams of students, staff and community members, analyzing the rubric, gathering evidence, and writing and rewriting narratives that would connect the evidence to the themes and aspects of the rubric. Then we gathered together at meeting sites around the nation (Albuquerque, New Orleans, Phoenix, and Denver) where we revised the rubrics for each entry, gave each other feedback on how to improve our portfolios, and shared our frustrations.

At the last meeting of that year, in Denver, we came together to analyze what we had learned in the final stage of our process, which was the presentation of our portfolios for formal review at the site level. This was a pivotal meeting for everyone involved in the team up to that point. We had spent a year or more developing a tool that would offer schools and communities an effective way to measure the impact of their work on student learning, on the community, and on the changing roles of everyone involved.

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facilitate the development of quality portfolios at new sites, shared the breadth of dissemination that we had already accomplished, and created a technological network for having electronic conversations about the implementation of the model.

We have already felt the effects of our work at the regional level all across the country. The Guffey School, along with a consortium of sister schools in Colorado, was funded by the Colorado Department of Education to develop and distribute a manual for teachers, students and community members to assist them in developing quality portfolios which will be shared in a statewide meeting in the spring of 2002. (The manual can be accessed through the consortium website at www.ruralcharters.org and is linked with the Colorado Department of Education.)

Our Rural Trust neighbors to the south in Arizona include Navajo charter school communities that have used the portfolio model to assess the impact of place-based work on community connections. They are now partnering with 25 Native sites in Hawaii to implement the model. Their project coordinator, Dr. Mark Sorenson, explains: “The work we are doing with the local Navajo charter schools and the Native Hawaiian charter schools is built on the simple idea that there is within each of these communities tremendous knowledge about the natural world that is held by the elders and a tremendous need for the children to connect with the elders for the survival of the communities. The use of the rubrics as a tool or roadmap is important, because we begin the activities about Native science with the end in mind.”

To the north of us, a project at the University of Wyoming called Coordinated Resource Management in the Classroom (see article p. 8) has 23 sites around the state that will be using Entry 1 of the portfolio model to assess student work, and then share their portfolios at a statewide meeting in February 2002.

There is no denying that the work is complex, time-consuming and fraught with frustration, not unlike any learning process. But for our small, rural, community-based schools it is a bright beacon of hope for students, staff and community members. The light from the beacon is shining, at last, on the depth and breadth of learning that happens within the context of community.
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10 and 11, Louisiana began a statewide accountability program that requires students to develop a conceptual understanding of subjects in the context of real-world applications. Without marked improvement in test scores, schools are subject to “corrective action,” with continued and increased external oversight and control of the school until improvements are evident.

Knight Roddy, project coordinator of the East Feliciana Parish Schools Project Connect, believes that using place-based education is the most effective way of teaching the concepts students need to understand on the state tests. “My selling point to teachers, administrators and school board members is that place-based is such an efficient and effective vehicle for helping students learn these concepts, because it’s meaningful to them.”

One of his best selling points, however, is the district’s 4th graders: the district’s 4th grade passage rate of state science tests increased by 13 percentage points in one year. In 2001, the passing average of the three elementary schools’ (Slaughter, Clinton and Jackson) 4th graders was the same as the state’s: 85 percent. The passage rate in 2000 was 72 percent, 10 points lower than the state’s average.

In the case of this parish, place-based had to be standards-based. According to Dr. Daisy Slan, the superintendent of East Feliciana schools, “Mr. Roddy took each standard required of the students and tailored it to resources in the community. He realized that our area had so many resources that would help teachers connect learning to their surroundings … we couldn’t have gotten to this point without his commitment and dedication.”

“By doing hands-on activities, students don’t just learn concepts, [they] remember them,” said Roddy. “The activities are minds-on as well—we’re teaching those concepts while enjoying the activity. In the research we have done, we have found students still remember months later what they did and what they saw in these place-based activities. That doesn’t happen with normal curriculum. When [students] try to memorize something for a test, it has a shelf-life of an hour.”

Roddy and Slan have seen improvements in other areas as well. Teachers are feeling more comfortable teaching science, in part because of Roddy’s efforts to train teachers and encourage them to take advantage of Rural Trust resources. Teachers are moving into making learning more interdisciplinary and communicating with each other through team curriculum planning. “I have seen teachers talking to each other about how to work on standards across curricular areas,” said Slan. Lastly, community partners are enjoying their involvement with the school and are excited about continuing their partnership.

One day, Roddy was working with students from Slaughter Elementary who were conducting a plot study of the land around the school, a project started by a teacher who attended a workshop at the Roger Tory Peterson Institute. Students were actively identifying plants and flowers by using the field guides all by themselves, without teacher direction. Two weeks later, the students wrote a post-project essay covering what they had done and learned.

“It’s so impressive to see them remembering what they did. To some it’s surprising, but it’s not really, because what they did was meaningful learning … they are going to remember what has meaning to them,” Roddy said.

Slan sees further proof that place-based education works for her district. “We know it’s working, quite simply because our state test scores have improved,” she said.

Vermont Rural Partnership, Vermont

* A case of integrating place-based standards into statewide requirements

In the small town of Peacham, Vermont (pop. 640), teachers meet no barriers in their quest to integrate place-based education into their curriculum. Projects designed to involve community and sustain local land and history proceed with support from the community and state, in part because in performing these projects, teachers are helping to meet the cross-curriculum student standards of “sense of place” and “sustainability” laid out in Vermont’s state learning standards.

What seems like a dream come true to place-based educators across the country—statewide, place-based standards—is a reality in Vermont, where a coalition of community members, educators and government representatives united to make those standards a part of state requirements.
Vermont’s story is a learning experience for anyone interested in introducing place-based standards into discussions of statewide requirements. In the mid ’90s, the State Board of Education in Vermont began to create their framework of standards, using an inclusive approach that involved wide participation from community members and educators. The resulting integrated framework includes standards that address the community’s expectations of a child’s “vital results”—including communication, civic and social responsibility and healthy choices, and “fields of knowledge” that cover discipline-based standards.

Later in the process, when the framework was fine-tuned by subject-specific committees taking a serious look at possible areas of improvement, another group of interested parties from a wide range of backgrounds formed separately to address what they saw as two missing standards. These proposed standards would address students’ understanding of place, and also their understanding of environmental, economic, social and political sustainability.

The standards hit a barrier before acceptance, and it “wasn’t the roadblock you would expect,” according to Margaret MacLean, principal at Peacham School and Director of the Vermont Rural Partnership, a Rural Trust network site that is an alliance of 18 small schools and communities. “In Vermont, it was the superintendents, not the State Board of Education, who were the largest roadblock. They were standing up for the teachers who felt that there were already enough standards to implement,” she said.

Nevertheless, since the process included such broad public involvement from people of all sectors of society, it was clear that there was enough support to pass the standards. “The group pointed out that many teachers were already meeting the requirement … teachers wouldn’t have to create new lessons, but they would have to document what they were already doing in a different way,” said MacLean.

The two new standards were passed about 18 months ago, and are now a part of the personal development and civic/social responsibility standards in the vital results section of the state’s standards.

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document. Indeed, implementing place-based projects comes with state support, and a sense of community ownership, thanks to the inclusive process that brought those standards to fruition. Joseph Kiefer of Food Works and member of VRP suggests that the collaborative approach Vermont used can be mimicked elsewhere. "It's a grassroots approach … it's our participant democracy at work. Collaboration is key, cooperation essential," he said.

Place-based educators also find room for alternative assessment practices in Vermont. The state requires districts to develop a comprehensive assessment plan in partnership with the state test-

At Peacham School and other schools involved with VRP projects forge ahead and are held up as models of how these standards enhance learning and involve young people in the preservation of Vermont’s small communities. "Many people advocated for these standards because they believed they were important to the future of our state," said MacLean.

Coordinated Resource Management in the Classroom, Wyoming
A case of using place-based in response to educators’ needs

In a state with approximately five people per square mile, and more than 9,000 farms and ranches that average 3,742 acres in size, the sustainability of Wyoming’s land and ecological diversity is everyone’s business. Ranchers, government agency representatives, environmentalists and concerned citizens employ consensus-building groups to make decisions about the use and management of the land and its natural resources, by using the state’s Coordinated Resource Management (CRM) program. By taking part in these groups, people of differing interests and opinions use logical reasoning and research to communicate their ideas and arrive at an acceptable solution for all involved.

Recognizing the educational potential of the CRM process, Pete Ellsworth, a professor at the University of Wyoming, worked with the Wyoming Department of Agriculture and the Institute for Environment and Natural Resources at the University of Wyoming to bring CRM into the classroom. He and his wife Judy, also a professor at the University, saw not only a way to teach students how to deal with complex, real-life issues; they also saw ways to tie their project into numerous state standards and provide teachers with an activity-based curriculum.

Student passage of Wyoming’s state testing in grades 4, 8 and 11 in literacy and math is not required in order to graduate or be promoted to the next grade. The onus is on individual districts to provide a “body of evidence” that students are meeting standards in all areas, by using an assessment system chosen by the district. That can involve just about any means of assessment, including standardized tests and class grades.

In answer to districts that wanted activity-based projects to meet state standards, the Wyoming Activities Consortium was formed through the Wyoming Department of Education. “This consortium of over half of the school districts was asking for alternatives to standardized and objective testing as a way of meeting the requirement,” according to Ellsworth. Composed of approximately 110 educators, the consortium works to identify activities in various disciplines that districts can use as evidence that students have satisfied state standards.

One such project adapted by the consortium is the Ellsworths’ project, CRM in the Classroom. The Ellsworths plugged their program into the consortium’s listing of activities in order to structure it and make linking it to standards easy for teachers. “The relationship between the activities and standards has been recognized by the state, so using this framework is easy for teachers … they can just sit down with this project and check off the standards addressed,” said Ellsworth.

This December, the Sweetwater County School District will join the more than 20 other districts that have integrated this project into the curriculum. In the past, the district hosted conversations between ranchers and teachers in order for the two groups to exchange viewpoints; it is also an opportunity for teachers to learn ranching and land-use instructional strategies for use in the classroom. With this partnership between educators and ranchers in mind, the district chose to begin the CRM in the Classroom program in a wide range of grades.

Connie Nerby is a teacher on special assignment in the district. “There are...
ranchers who see [projects like these] as their only real survival piece,” notes Nerby. “They see it as a way to garner support by opening up their lifestyles and sharing them with students. It’s to their benefit to have a public that is educated about the realities and the obstacles of ranching.”

The project benefits students and schools as well. Through their involvement with the CRM process, students gain a comprehensive set of skills covering science, economics, math, history, social studies and language arts. Schools gain a powerful tool to meet state standards.

The project involves students in either existent CRM teams or perhaps a school’s simulated group. Generally, students research and write a comprehensive case study of a piece of land. The group conducts a thorough study of the site, including conducting an inventory of the land and its components and learning the viewpoints of others who are interested in the future use of the land. Students then use a consensus-based decision making process to reach an agreement on a land management plan. The group writes a report on their findings and designs a data collection and analysis plan to monitor the implementation of the management plan. In some projects, students are active participants in the CRM team, and therefore take part in all of the decision-making done by the group.

Addressing state standards is more manageable when schools integrate this project into their curriculum. And, the Ellsworths and others will soon have a means of assessing the work through their participation on the Rural Trust portfolio design team. “Aligning activities like ours with the standards is not difficult. The challenge comes in documenting student learning with regards to addressing those standards,” said Ellsworth.

Their involvement with the Rural Trust team will provide them with the proper tools to address this work. “Evaluating our efforts with this program will allow us to use CRM as evidence that kids are meeting our state standards,” said Nerby.

The Case for Using Place-Based

“When learning is grounded in the local community, [students] learn, they are motivated, they score well on tests, behavior problems decrease,” said Vermont’s Kiefer. He points to Closing the Achievement Gap: Using the Environment as an Integrating Context for Learning as evidence that the State Education and Environment Roundtable, as his evidence.

In their research, authors Leiberman and Hoody define “environment as an integrating context for learning” (EIC) as education that uses “a school’s surroundings and community as a framework within which students can construct their own learning, guided by teachers and administrators.” The researchers found that students involved in EIC programs “earn higher grades and score better in reading, writing and math.” Other benefits include: “reduced discipline and classroom management problems, increased engagement and enthusiasm for learning, and greater pride and ownership in accomplishments.”

“Place-based is just an effective way to learn,” notes Louisiana’s Roddy. And as sites in Wyoming, Louisiana and Vermont have shown, it’s also an effective way to creatively teach students what they need to know to meet state standards and prepare for assessment.

You can contact Knight Roddy at kroddy@efsbl.k12.la.us; Margaret MacLean at margaret.maclean@ruraledu.org; and Peter Ellsworth at petere@uwyo.edu for more information on the programs in Louisiana, Vermont and Wyoming.

There’s More to Education than Test Scores

By Kelsey Harnist

Standards and assessment are inherent parts of our existence as human beings. Truly, not a day can pass without someone measuring and critiquing our achievements or failures, however large or small they may be. From grades and tests in school, performance evaluations at work, and judgments socially, they are impossible to escape. Americans seem to thrive on the idea of quantification; we yearn to have our actions validated. It gives us a sense of accomplishment to know that other people think well of what we have done.

Beginning in the 20th century with the SAT (Standard Aptitude Test), originally intended to give minority students equal opportunity in the college admission process, standardized tests have become an integral part of education in the United States. Every student is familiar with them: days are taken out of the regular schedule of classes, passages are read, problems are solved, and endless rows of “bubbles” are filled in. Six months later, an envelope arrives in the mail, notifying John Doe of his scores. The envelope is placed in a bag, maybe a box, and is promptly forgotten, right? That may be about to change. The use of standardized tests as a measurement not just of a student’s success, but now of a school’s success, is becoming much more prevalent; in many states, the amount of funding a school receives is directly proportional to the school’s performance on such exams.

As the proliferation of standardized tests continues, school districts are beginning to employ them in “high stakes” situations. Instead of trivia to be observed and then disregarded, test scores may now determine whether a student attends summer school, moves on to the next grade, and, most importantly, if a student graduates from high school. Mandatory tests are also used as a lens to evaluate the impact of state standards. So far, 29 states have adopted systems revolving around the high-stakes concept, while several others have it on their agendas.

What are the benefits of these tests? According to their proponents, tests have many benefits. For one, they are an excellent device for parents to see how their child is doing in relation to students around the state and the nation. They force schools to focus on basic skills, such as reading and writing, which, oddly enough, can be neglected. Finally, the exams can be used as a tool to chart the progress of individual students and identify areas where improvement is needed.

In spite of all this, response to the use of high-stakes tests among students has been less than enthusiastic.

In California, the High School Exit Exam has been called everything from “worthless,” to “ridiculous,” to “a total waste of time.” Indeed, over fifty percent of the state’s freshmen passed the Exam, yet they are required to take it again in their sophomore, junior, and senior years. In Texas, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills brought with it problems much more serious than boredom. Says Maria Hernandez, a resident of and student in the Lone Star State: “Teachers have begun teaching to the TAAS. Teachers teach only what is needed to pass or master the exam and not much else.” If instructors feel pressured to have their pupils succeed on such exams, it is because their students’ performance often dictates the amount of monetary support given to the school, which in turn affects the quality of resources teachers have on hand. The lack of resources can be seriously detrimental to the learning process, a side effect of the test its creators certainly did not intend. If students are succeeding simply because they have been taught to the test, however, that means they are missing out on everything besides basic skills. That is quite a thin line to walk between real failure and false progress.

Are there alternative ways to measure student achievement? Educators in Vermont think so. In Vermont, students prepare portfolios of their best work in math and English that include essays concerning how the pieces were chosen and, in math, how the student arrived at the solution. Professionally trained teachers then examine the portfolios in order to determine how well they meet the state standards. Cara Cookson, a former student in Cabot, Vermont, says: “I think [portfolios are] a much more fair system of assessing student work. The teacher doesn’t just see what answer the student gets, or what the student wrote, but what thought processes he or she used to get there.” In Guffey, Colorado, an elementary school has taken a much more radical approach. Fourth-, fifth-, and sixth-graders, are directly involved in creating standards and assessment tools; the students write proposals regarding what they should be held accountable for and how their achievements should be measured, as well as participating in the hiring of teachers. Such hands-on student involvement is extremely rare; nevertheless, the program has reportedly been very successful.

Standardized tests are obviously not the only way to assess student performance, but for the moment, the momentum seems to favor test scores as the sole indicator of student success. But can tests, particularly high-stakes tests, really measure all of our abilities—or are they a “quick fix” that only captures students’ skill and drill knowledge and robs teachers of flexibility in their instruction, making the classroom a duller place? Will tests prove viable in the long run when used as the single instrument to judge student learning? Only time and a few million darkened circles will tell.

Kelsey Harnist is junior at Anderson Valley High School in Boonville, California. He is a founding member of the National Youth Council of the Rural School and Community Trust.
The Rural Trust Video
Now Available

The Rural Trust has a new video available, *Communities and Schools: Getting Better Together*. Using the voices of students, teachers, and community members, the video shows how place-based education is helping small rural schools and the communities they serve improve teaching, learning and community life.

This video is designed to show those who may not be familiar with place-based education why community involvement is so critical to school success, and how kids can do incredible things when their academic learning is based on identifying community needs and solving real-life problems.

To order send a $20 check (includes shipping) payable to the “Rural School and Community Trust” to: Rural Trust Video, 1825 K Street, Suite 703, Washington, DC 20006.

The video is only one of many resources available from the Rural Trust. Some are printed reports; many are available in both printed form and online. For a listing, go to the Rural Trust website at [www.ruraledu.org](http://www.ruraledu.org) and click on Publications.
Publications of Note

14 Points: Successfully Involving Youth in Decision Making

From Youth on Board

It just makes sense. Young people should be involved in the decisions that affect their lives. They benefit.

Organizations benefit. And so does the community. This comprehensive guide to youth involvement is a logical starting point for preparing young people to take ownership of their communities. It includes guidelines, worksheets, tips, a resource directory and stories from the street (all designed to help young people and adults work together to improve their communities.) The book is $25. Go to www.youthonboard.org or call (617) 623-9900, ext. 1242 for ordering information. Also check out their follow-up book, Youth on Board: Why and How to Involve Youth in Organizational Decision-Making.

Writing to Make a Difference: Classroom Projects for Community Change

Edited by Chris Benson and Scott Christian with Walter H. Gooch and Dixie Goswami

With chapters written by teachers, this book describes how to get students involved in action research and in writing about issues that are important to them and their communities. The projects show teachers how to engage their students while also teaching basic skills that appear in educational standards and assessment frameworks. Order it through Columbia’s Teachers College Press at http://store.tcpress.com/0807741868.shtml. The book is $21.95 in paperback.

Educator’s Guide to Program Development in Natural Resources: Education as a Community Resource

By Jon Yoder and Neal Maine

This manual assists educators in developing natural resources programs that use ecosystem-based management principles and concepts to teach ecological sustainability, and are delivered through a community-based approach to education. This report is available free through the Northwest Center for Sustainable Resources. To order, contact Lauren Elliano at (503) 399-5270 or by e-mail at elll@chemeketa.edu.

If you would like your publication to be considered for Publications of Note, please send the book, along with ordering information, to: Editor, Rural Trust, 1825 K Street, NW, Suite 703, Washington, DC 20006.