

Results uncertain

Why educators question assessment testing

By LYNN ORR

A \$1 million state education program is in trouble.

For nine years, all fourth and seventh grade students in the state have been given the Michigan Assessment Tests, which last year cost nearly \$900,000 to administer. The State Board of Education is asking for another half million dollars to expand the program to include first, 10th and possibly 12th grade students.

But the current program fails to get even a "B" rating from tri-county administrators.

The Michigan Education Assessment Program has been under fire for several years now. What do the tests indicate about the state's education system? If an individual district's scores are "poor" or below state averages, does the district alter its teaching methods? Are the results used by school districts?

or is the testing program one more state mandate that costs taxpayers money and is of little use to school districts?

Criticism of the testing program ranges from mild to adamant, and few educators are willing to attack the program up front. The general public has

little understanding of the program's objectives, and mistakenly the test performance of school districts.

Publishing comparisons among school districts at the county level was eliminated to avoid the "report card" syndrome, but districts frequently invite plaudits for scoring above the state average.

One attempt to determine the program's validity reveals that, after nine years, the testing still fails to meet the needs of many school districts.

A survey conducted by the Senate Education Study committee indicates that less than half the superintendents and curriculum coordinators in Oakland, Wayne and Macomb counties approve the test.

"This suggests that strong questions should be asked concerning the effectiveness of a program which is now in its ninth year and is able to garner approval from only half the districts sampled," wrote Sen. Bill Huffman (D-Royal Oak) in a letter attached to the survey results.

Huffman's committee recommends a refined state-wide survey of all K-12 districts to determine attitudes about the testing program. The committee believes the survey may provide a chart for the assessment test's future.

analysis

THE TEST is designed to demonstrate whether students have achieved the skills deemed necessary by an annually appointed test committee of state educators.

All fourth and seventh grade students in the state are tested in the fall. School districts usually receive the results mid-winter.

Skill objectives are tested through a series of questions. A student meets the objective if he correctly answers four of the five questions on one subject. Both reading and math objectives are tested.

Scoring is complicated. The proportion of objectives attained is divided into four categories: 0-25 per cent; 25-49 per cent; 50-74 per cent; and 75-100 per cent.

However, the scores only reflect a student's ability at the time of the test. The problem, say educators, is that the curriculum in one district varies from that in another. One student may score high in metrics because his teacher already taught it. Another student may score low, simply because metrics had not yet been introduced.

ARE THE test result effectively used by local districts?

Comments from the administrators' survey suggest not.

"We use the California Test of Basic Skills," wrote one administrator. "It gives us IQ as well as achievement. It breaks down comparisons of slow learners, average and exceptional. We discovered a few years ago that we were doing a superb job with slow learners, a good job with average students, but an unsuccessful job with exceptional students, and maintained our accomplishments with the other two categories."

The Michigan Assessment Testing Program would have done nothing to determine the problem.

Another administrator wrote: "The MEAP has been the primary catalyst in upgrading the level program evaluation in the state."

"To be cost effective and practical, give us the funds for testing and we will do the job at less cost and effectively," wrote another.

About 43 per cent of those responding favor discontinuing the test and replacing it with state-wide sampling testing (either random districts or some students from each district). The sampling would be used by the state board to determine general educa-

tional policy. Forty-one per cent said the program makes a positive contribution and were opposed to any change. That survey question was regarded as unfair by some administrators.

In terms of state educational spend-

ing, \$1.5 million is small potatoes; but with the dire financial needs of school districts throughout the state, spending any money on a program that's regarded with such mixed feelings and is of questionable use, appears questionable itself.

Schulman questions test use

By LYNN ORR

Farmington School District Supt. Lewis Schulman favors an expansion of the Michigan Education Assessment program at the ninth or 10th grade level.

The test could be a useful in the preparation of high school curriculum, he says.

A 12th grade test would not be helpful, he said. An "exam competency" test would have little benefit to students.

"I don't see a great purpose in 12th grade testing," he said.

The assessment program helps to determine if students are learning skills that have been taught. A test before graduation would not help a particular student.

Schulman's support of the assessment program is mild.

"I think it has a place to the extent that it could be refined," he said. When it's used like a report card to compare school districts it loses purpose, he said.

"The results can help you improve the direction of the instructional program by determining if you're setting out to do has been accomplished," he said.

For example, if the majority of students fail to meet the test's objectives in one area, staff members attempt to determine why.

A skill may not have been taught to the students before they took the test but it may be planned for the future.

If that's the case, the district isn't worried about a "poor" score.

If students do poorly in an area that's been covered, it's time to determine why the students didn't learn, he said.

But numbers are meaningless unless examined to determine how they can be used for curriculum planning, he warned.

The district relies on tests such as the Differential Aptitude Test (DAT) which is given to all eighth grade students.

The DAT measures verbal and math skills and evaluates how a student's particular skills have a bearing on occupation.

"This gives us some idea of job-related competency," Schulman said.

The district administers the test in eighth grade to allow counselors to assist a student in preparing a high school curriculum.

Most experts agree that aptitude rarely changes drastically from second grade, and the DAT is useful in determining how a student uses his or her natural gifts in a special field, Schulman said.

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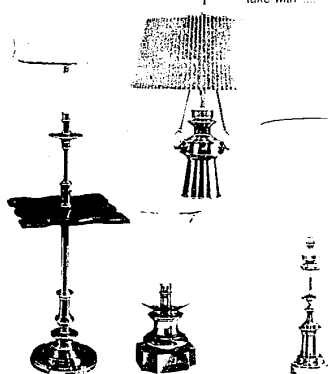
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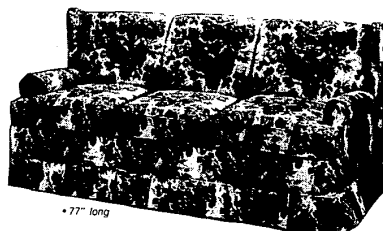
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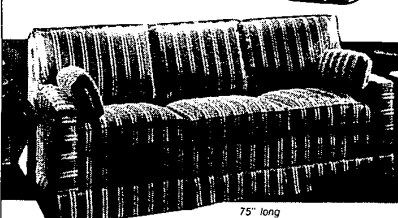
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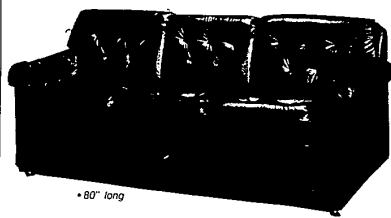
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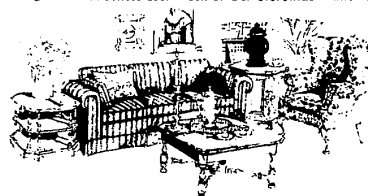
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