The NERA Researcher

Newsletter of the Northeastern Educational Research Association

Editors: Geraldine Mongillo, William Paterson University, and Heejung An, William Paterson University

THE PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

David Moss

With the turning of a new year it is an appropriate time to pause and reflect upon where we have been, and perhaps more importantly, where we are headed. Although historians have refuted the claim of a "golden age" in education[1], at this time of year one cannot help but think back to a time when things seemed a little less frenetic and high stakes. I suspect the early years of the 21st century will be viewed as a particularly challenging time in our profession, and thus more than ever, an organization like ours can afford a much welcomed sense of community and continuity which can help us successfully navigate our present challenges.

Looking forward I see a great promise for NERA in 2008 and beyond, and in fact, I have recently taken some steps to ensure our organization is well positioned to engage in our mission of research and advocacy for decades to come. Perhaps most significantly, with unanimous support from the Board, we are in the process of ensuring that NERA remains compliant with all appropriate tax codes at both the federal and state levels. We are first confirming our standing as an organization, and will then take the necessary steps to once and for all verify our status as a not-for-profit association. We have retained the services of a prominent law firm in here in Connecticut, and they assure us that once our standing is confirmed it will carry forward with us regardless of where our leadership team resides. I look forward to keeping you all informed in the coming months regarding this timely and essential endeavor.

We are also making great strides with our outreach to potential new members. We have reviewed our strategic plan developed a few years back and have initiated a proactive approach to recruiting both professionals and students to join NERA and submit proposals for next year's conference. The feedback from our first meeting in Rocky Hill, CT was extremely positive. When Steve Sireci and I, along with the Conference selection committee, were vetting the nearly two dozen venues this time last year we had high hopes for finding a site which offered an upgrade in facilities (including 100+ hotel rooms and conference space to accommodate both sessions and functions), remain as centrally located within our region as possible, and offer members affordable accommodations. Not an easy balance to achieve. As I write this article, we are in the final stages of negotiating a contract with the same hotel for an additional year. We have strived hard to be responsive to your comments with regard to food options at meals and offering graduate students reduced rates. Details will be forthcoming in the February issue of the *Researcher* – I think everyone will be pleased with the final package.

These first few months as president of NERA have been both eventful and rewarding. Although I have the privilege of leading our organization, there are folks whom may be a bit less visible, but nevertheless should be recognized for their efforts. Over the upcoming year you will be hearing from Tom Levine and Helen Marx, your program co-chairs for the fall 2008 annual meeting. Like myself, they are here at the Neag School of Education at the University of Connecticut. They are working with Meg Monaghan, a doctoral candidate in social studies teacher education. Consistent with his unwavering support for NERA for nearly three decades, Dean Richard Schwab has made our "Team NERA" vision here at UConn a reality through his generous support.

My students over the years would tell you that I can't even say "good morning" in less than 10 minutes to kick off class – perhaps not surprisingly my brief remarks have begun to run a bit long. Thus, I'll leave you for now with the very best wishes for a safe, productive, and joyful new year.

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[1] Rousmaniere, K. (2005). In search of a profession: A history of American teachers. In D.M. Moss, W.J. Glenn, & R.L. Schwab (Eds.), <u>Portrait of a Profession: Teaching and teachers in the 21st Century</u>. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.

Message from the Editors

We would like to wish everyone a Healthy and Happy new year. We hope that you had the opportunity to share some cheer with family and friends over the Holidays. This issue is filled with highlights from our conference which you made a fantastic success.

On another note, Heejung and I have completed our term as editors of this newsletter and before we move on we would like to thank the members and the board for making this a wonderful experience. NERA and its members are unique and it has been an honor to serve an organization that contributes so much to the educational community by nurturing novice researchers and its dedication to current scholarly research. We will continue to be part of NERA and look forward to meeting again at future conferences. Until new editors are found, we leave the *Researcher* in the capable hands of Steve and Thanos…Thank you.

The Editors

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Message from the Past-President

Toward More Informed Educational Assessment Policy

Before I delve into my presidential address, I must state that it has been a pleasure serving as President of NERA. I greatly enjoyed working with the NERA Board of Directors over the past year and working with our conference co-chairs, Amy Dresher and April Zenisky. What a terrific job they did! The 2007 conference was a real thrill for me, as I hope it was for you. It was especially rewarding to see so many new faces at the conference, particularly our new colleagues from James Madison University. Not only did I get to meet the JMU IRT Monkey, I got to give him (her?) a kiss! Being President of NERA definitely has its advantages! Thanks to everyone who attended and presented at the conference. NERA is its membership and it was great to interact professionally and socially with you all. It was also a thrill to listen and interact with our keynote speakers—Cora Marrett and Wayne Camara—both of whom gave inspiring addresses. It was also terrific to see and listen to so many former NERA presidents. I leave the Presidency feeling very good about where our Association is heading including the capabilities of our new President, Professor David Moss.

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Happy New Year!

Gerri & Heejung

The Presidential Address

Stephen G. Sireci

As a psychometrician with expertise in educational assessment, I have worked with many organizations to help them accomplish the goals of their assessment programs. I viewed the goals of these programs as laudable. For example, in licensure testing, the testing agencies have the goals of providing access to the profession and protecting the public from incompetent practitioners. In elementary, middle, and high school achievement testing, the goals have been improving student achievement and providing objective data on student achievement for educators and educational policy makers. Thus, I have always felt my work in educational assessment was contributing to a greater good in improving education and providing data to help others make important decisions.

I had a rude awakening one day while driving home from work. While stopped at a red light, I saw a bumper sticker that had the acronym for the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment Program (MCAS) with a line through it and the caption "These tests hurt kids!" My bubble burst. Do these tests really hurt kids? Was I working against the educational system instead of for it? To answer these questions I began to engage testing critics in conversation. I discovered that many of their complaints were legitimate, but that many others were ill informed. Furthermore, most of the legitimate complaints had more to do with testing policies than the tests themselves. Based on this experience, I decided we must do more to inform educational assessment policies.

In the remainder of this address, I will present and critique some of the most common criticisms of educational tests. I will also argue that educational assessments are a critical component of a quality education system. My argument rests on five points:

1. Educational tests receive too much undeserved criticism.

2. Tests are a critical component of quality education

3. Appropriate testing practices can promote student achievement.

4. To establish sensible assessment practices, the limitations of tests must be understood.

5. There are steps we can take to use tests to improve student achievement.

Educational Tests Receive too Much Criticism

In making the point that educational testing is too often unfairly criticized, I will borrow heavily from Cizek (2005) who made the same point. He pulled the following quotes from authors of articles in the *Phi Delta Kappan*, a popular journal for the education community. The first quote comes from Alphie Kohn who urged teachers to ""make the fight against standardized testing our top priority…until we have chased this monster from our schools" (Kohn, 2001, cited in Cizek, 2005, p. 27). Should teachers' number one priority be fighting against tests? I don't think so. I think it should be teaching students.

A second quote, from Thompson (2001) described standardized testing as "the evil twin" of an authentic standards movement (cited in Cizek, 2005, p. 27). A third and final quote to illustrate exaggerated criticisms of tests comes from Bracey (2002) who described high stakes and high standards as "infernal machines of social destruction." Are tests really this evil, or are these claims exaggerated? You can guess where I come out on this issue, but let's review some of the purposes of educational tests, starting with some very brief history.

Modern educational testing is often traced to the work of Alfred Binet in 1904 who was charged with identifying students in Paris who needed help getting through school. With his colleague Simon, they developed the Binet-Simon intelligence scale, which was a 30-item test designed to ensure that no child could be denied instruction in the Parisian school system without formal examination. Thus, the purpose of the first formal educational test was to promote access to instruction, which does not seem like a nefarious goal to me.

Skipping over testing in the military, which was done largely to help place recruits into appropriate military occupations, the next major event in educational testing was the first large-scale administration of the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) in 1942. Today, the SAT is the most widely criticized test in the world. It has been accused of everything from promoting social inequities to causing them. I wish the causes of social inequities were that easy to identify. The reality is the SAT was developed to identify and select students for college admission based on *merit* rather than privilege. Before the SAT, college admission decisions were based largely on family status and which private high school a student attended.

Are there problems with standardized tests that should concern us? There certainly are, and I will subsequently discuss some. However, it is important for us to bear in mind that standardized tests are designed to *promote* fairness. They provide a level playing field for students by
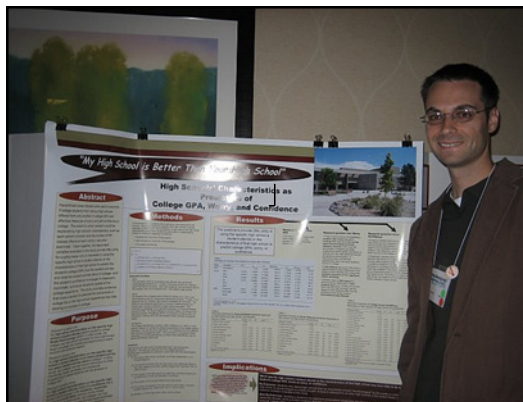
2007 Conference Report and Highlights

While new locations and venues may be the cause for trepidation for some, it did not keep NERA members away from the 2007 conference. Over 200 members attended the conference at the Marriott Rocky Hill, outside of Hartford, CT, an increase from the 160 attendees of the 2006 conference. 106 papers, posters, symposia, and working groups were presented, with about one quarter of the presentations focusing on Measurement, Statistics, and Quantitative research and another quarter focusing on Teaching, Learning, and Classroom research. Some of the highlights of the conference included:

- Pre-Sessions on program evaluation by Bob Gable and IRT by Hariharan Swaminathan and Jane Rogers.

- Keynote addresses by Cora Marrett and Wayne Camara.

- Featured sessions on using assessment data, NERA Past Presidents, Teacher-as-Researcher, and the Graduate Student Issues Committee.

- Joke contest and lively entertainment.

Poster Session Displays

2007 Conference Chairs Amy Dresher and April Zenisky

Pete Swerdzewski presents his poster

NERA members discuss the posters

Julie Rosenthal from William Paterson University shares her research with colleague Gerri Mongillo

NERA Members Getting Together

President Steve Sireci mingles with
Rosemary Reshetar and Kurt Geisinger

The James Madison University group
enjoys the festivities

We appreciate everyone's participation in the conference. It could not have been the success that it was if it wasn't for you – the members!!

April Zenisky and Amy Dresher
2007 Conference Program Co-Chairs

MARK YOUR CALENDARS!

NERA's 39th Annual Conference
will occur
October 22-24, 2008

At the Marriott Hotel, Rocky Hill, Connecticut

Tom Levine and Helen Marx
2008 Conference Program Co-Chairs

You are invited to share your own research, learn from others' efforts, make new friends, and rejoin old ones at our 2008 Conference. NERA's 2007 conference was a smashing success; this conference promises to continue supporting your work and helping you connect with exciting colleagues.

You'll find more information about the conference in emails and in future editions of *the NERA Researcher*.

Technology Report

The website has been live since September and over 100 members used the website to join or renew their members and register for the 2007 conference. Nearly $8000 in dues and registration fees were paid through PAYPAL. We are currently in the process of updating the information on the website to reflect the 2007 conference, award recipients and plans for the coming year.

Teacher-as-Researcher Award Winner for 2007

Dolores Burton
Chair Teacher-as-Researcher Committee

The Teacher as Researcher Award winner for 2007, **Beth Mowry** graduated from Pennsylvania State University with a Bachelor's Degree in Political Science, and for ten years held various positions in Girl Scout Councils in Pennsylvania. Upon relocating to Brooklyn, Beth enrolled in Brooklyn College to earn her Master's Degree in Science Education. She graduated Summa Cum Laude and with faculty honors in May, 2007. Beth taught 6th and 7th grade science and is currently teaching 10th grade earth science at Brooklyn School for Collaborative Studies.

Beth's study, *Peaks and Valleys: A Teacher/Researcher Teaches Science to Students with Special Needs,* examines the researcher's experience as a first year teacher and her class - a self-contained special education class of six and seven grade students of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds in an urban middle school.

The teacher/researcher began her study by conducting an extensive review of the literature focusing on articles about both science education and special education. She examined best practices from the literature on teaching science to students with special needs and identified significant holes in the science education literature regarding effective teaching strategies to reach these students.

Beth used a qualitative research methodology for data collection which included keeping detailed notes about the teacher/researcher's experiences during the 2006-2007 school year. The data points were; a detailed field journal including communications with other teachers, interactions with students and their families, and copies of student work. The teacher/researcher studied herself and the class with which she was working - a self-contained special education class of students who are in grades six and seven at an urban middle school. There were three girls and six boys of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds from middle to working socioeconomic class families in the class. Two students were classified on their Individualized Education Plans as mentally retarded. The other seven were classified as emotionally disturbed and had accompanying learning disabilities. There were two paraprofessionals working with her in the classroom and the classroom teacher, a special educator, was out of the classroom during science classes.

This ethnography illuminated deep differences between the culture of a science education teacher and the culture of a special education teacher. Training, expectations, and classroom practices of these two specialists in education differed significantly, one not being familiar with the practices of the other.

The study has implications for university faculty, school administrators and teachers. Primarily, university faculty must be aware that the cultures formulated in teacher training programs may be in conflict with other educational cultures. Teachers can learn from the successes, insights, and failures of this teacher in her first year, and administrators can learn about the implications that can arise when teachers are placed in positions out of their expertise.

The Teacher-as-Researcher Committee reviews submissions for the award from teacher researchers nominated by themselves and others. Please encourage teachers you consider worthy of the award to submit a proposal. Applications will be available on the NERA website shortly. Please see the website http://www.nera-education.org/awards/teacherresearcher.php for the latest information about the award for 2008.

Special thanks to this year's hard working committee members; Susan Eichenholtz, Dorothy Feola, Brian Preston, and Alison Zhou.

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ensuring test content, administration conditions, and scoring procedures are the same for everyone. Thus, I believe we should all work together to promote fair and accurate assessment of students, rather than spending time rejecting educational tests at the outset

Tests are a Critical Component for Quality Education
Can we have good instruction without tests? I don't think so. We need tests to understand what students are learning and what they are still struggling to learn. As a parent, I value the information I receive from standardized tests about how my sons are doing with respect to core subject areas. Nationally normed tests tell me how well they do relative to their peers across the nation, and the state testing program (MCAS) tells me how well they do with respect to achievement level standards established by the state. Test results also tell me how their school and their district compare with the rest of the state. I find that information useful, but it is also useful to teachers and school administrators who can look at these results and plan instruction in a way that considers students' strengths and weaknesses.

The Graduate Lounge

Andri Ioannou

T he Graduate Student Issues Council (GSIC) of the Northeastern Educational Research Association (NERA) was initiated in October of 2006, by Dr. Kristen Huff from College Board. GSIC's mission is to support the involvement and professional development of NERA graduate students members and to reach out to new graduate students in an effort to increase the diversity of institutions represented at NERA. During the first year of its existence, the five-member committee managed successfully to accomplish several tasks including establishing the 2007 Best Paper by a Graduate Student Award Competition, organizing a GSIC-sponsored session at the NERA 2007 conference, preparing "The Graduate Lounge" of *NERA Researcher*, and having a meeting at the NERA 2007 conference where a number of graduate students met to brainstorm about GSIC potential future activities.

GSIC is currently composed of six members. We are thrilled to continue and extent GSIC's accomplishments towards our mission. Activities that are planned for the 2007-2008 year include but are not limited to:

1) Awarding the 2007 Best Paper by a Graduate Student Award to a NERA graduate student member whose paper will be deemed exemplary by GSIC and one board-appointed faculty expert.

2) Organizing the 2008 Best Paper by a Graduate Student Award Competition.

3) Organizing the second GSIC-sponsored session at the NERA 2008 conference. The 2007 GSIC-sponsored session was organized around job-hunting in academic and non-academic settings, as well as publishing practices. GSIC is planning to organize the 2008 session around funding opportunities for graduate students and grant writing. Any ideas are welcome.

4) Continue to prepare "The Graduate Lounge" of the *NERA Researcher.*

5) Make efforts to establish relations with the graduate student committees of other conferences, especially of the American Educational Research Association (AERA).

6) Representing graduate students at all NERA Board meetings. Please contact us with ideas, contributions, concerns, or anything you want to discuss. We will consider your input.

GSIC Members 2007-2008:
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- Megan France, James Madison University,
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- Andri Ioannou, University of Connecticut,
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A quality educational system involves a curriculum derived through a consensus process focusing on the critical knowledge and skill areas students need to be taught. It also features quality instruction targeted to the objectives stipulated in the curriculum. Finally, it involves assessment that is aligned with the curriculum and provides data to inform instruction. In short, I believe quality education requires alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, so that these three components can inform and improve each other. I cannot imagine an educational system devoid of any one of these three components.

Appropriate Testing Practices Can Promote Student Achievement

This point is related to the previous one. Since assessment is critical to quality education, it should help promote student achievement. How? One answer lies in using assessment results to make decisions about instruction—both at the individual student level and at more aggregated levels. For example, when test results show a student performs at the 98th percentile in mathematics, or that she scores in the highest achievement level in math, it might make a whole lot of sense to provide that student with more challenging material than the rest of the class is getting (unless of course many students in the class perform similarly). If a student is performing at a much lower percentile, or not meeting the achievement level standards, targeted instruction at the requisite skills might be needed. Teachers can also use test results to see whether their students in general are mastering the material they taught. Similarly, administrators can look at assessment data across classrooms and schools to identify gaps in meeting educational goals. For example, principals we interviewed about assessment issues told us the MCAS results made them realize they needed to do more

Highlights of the NERA Board of Directors' Meetings

(October 17 and 19, 2007)

Darlene Perner
NERA Secretary (2006-2009)

Date: October 17, 2007

Present: Dolores Burton, Amy Dresher, Barbara Helms, David Moss (President-Elect), Kristen Huff, Kathryn Nottis, Thanos Patelis, Darlene Perner, Brian Preston, Teresa Rooney (Past President), Steve Sireci (President), Barbara Wert, April Zenisky, Thomas Levine, Helen Marx, Meg Monaghan; **Regrets:** Asil Özdoğru

The meeting began at 10:05 a.m.

1. **Introductions**: Steve began the meeting with welcome and introductions.

2. **Approval of Minutes**: The minutes from the 03/23/07 meeting were approved.

3. **Election Results**: The results of the election are: Kristen Huff, President-Elect; and Thanos Patelis and Lynn Shelley-Sireci, Board members.

4. **State of the Organization**: Steve reported that this year he worked primarily on the conference with his Conference Program Co-Chairs, Amy and April. This has been a transition year with a new location and new hotel staff. Steve indicated areas that need to be addressed: committees and their membership; the strategic plan; membership; and an up-to-date handbook. It was requested that the handbook be posted on the Web site. Steve reported the accomplishments of the Graduate Student Issues Committee with the facilitation of Kristen and the work of Asil as Chair.

5. **Web Site Update**: Steve stated that the re-designed Web site has been another great accomplishment. Barbara H. was thanked for her hard work on this. Barbara H. requested that any comments or additions to the Web site be directed to her. She will check on the cost of having electronic submissions for conference proposals. Steve thanked Barbara and Brian.

6. **Conference Update**:

a) **Conference Program Co-Chairs Report**. Amy and April reported that they received 109 proposals. It has been a pleasure working with the hotel staff. Total sponsorships to date have amounted to $5000. The hotel has provided some extra services because of our willingness to share some space with another organization. Steve commended April and Amy, Conference Co-Chairs.

Steve will extend our thanks to Laurie and Lisa, hotel events personnel at the Award's luncheon. He announced that there will be two special events at our evening gatherings: a jazz band and a rock/dance band. There will be a new member orientation and Teresa has arranged for a joke contest with prizes.

b) **Sponsors.** Steve reported that York College/CUNY was not listed in the program. A conference program has been sent to all the sponsors. Barnes and Noble Bookstore has also contributed.

7. **Treasurer's Report and Membership Report**: Barbara H. reported that to date 200 members (121 professional, 6 retirees, 73 graduate students) have joined or renewed their membership for 2007-08 year and 183 members (112 professional, 5 retirees and 66 graduate students) have registered for the conference. These figures represent an increase in both membership and registration. Barbara also reported that there was a personal donation of $250 in support of the conference. A Treasurer's Report on Membership and Finance was distributed to the Board. Steve commended and thanked Barbara for her great work over the years as Treasurer. A motion was made to accept the Treasurer's report. Motion carried.

8. **Graduate Student Issues Committee (GSIC)**: Kristen congratulated Asil, GSIC Chair, stating that there were two main accomplishments this year: the inclusion of the graduate student session—publishing, exploring career options and experiencing graduate student life; and the development of a proposal for the Best Paper or Poster by a Graduate Student Award. A motion was made to support issuing the Best Paper or Poster by a Graduate Student Award on a yearly basis and that $250 would be credited to the recipient to be used for conference expenses in the following year. Motion carried. Kristen and Asil were thanked for their GSIC contributions.

9. **Awards' Recipients**:

a) Teacher-as-Researcher: Beth Mowry
b) Leo Doherty Memorial Award: Diane Liebert.
c) Thomas Donlon Mentorship Award: Dianne Zager.
d) Lorne H. Woollatt Distinguished Paper Award (2006): Tony Artino

10. **NERA Researcher**: Steve indicated that Gerry and Heejung will complete their terms as co-editors. Thanos and Steve will edit the *NERA Researcher* until a new editor(s) can be found.

(Continued from Boarding Meeting—page 8)

11. **Teacher-as-Researcher Award Committee**: The issue of graduate students qualifying for the Teacher-as-Researcher Award was discussed. Dolores will work with the Committee to get feedback regarding whether the award includes graduate students or teachers doing action research in the classroom but not for course/thesis credit.

12. **Presidential Transition/New Initiatives**: David announced that Helen and Tom will be the 2008 NERA Conference Program Co-Chairs and Meg will be the Graduate Assistant to help the Co-Chairs. Major focus for 2008 Co-Chairs will be the conference location. He reported that membership will be the key task for the BOD. David shared some of his plans to increase membership, donations and sponsorships.

13. **Closure**: Both Steve and David were thanked for their leadership and hard work. Steve welcomed Helen, Tom and Meg and appreciation was extended to the Board. Next meeting will be in January or February.

The meeting adjourned at 12:20 pm.

Date: October 19, 2007

Present: Dolores Burton, Barbara Helms, Tom Levine and Helen Marx (2008 Program Co-Chairs), Meg Monaghan (Graduate Assistant), David Moss (President), Kristen Huff (President-Elect), Brian Preston, Lynn Shelley-Sireci, Steve Sireci (Past President);
Regrets: Kathryn Nottis, Thanos Patelis, Darlene Perner, Barbara Wert

The meeting began at 12:10 pm.

1. **Treasurer's Term Extended:** David informed the Board of Barbara Helms' willingness to extend her term. A motion was made to extend Barbara Helms' term an additional year, 2009. Motion carried.

2. **Membership:** David indicated that a priority during his term as President is membership. A motion was made to increase the membership budget from $300 to $750 to cover the cost of outreach to other universities and institutions. Motion carried.

3. **Best Paper or Poster by a Graduate Student Award and Teacher-as-Researcher Award:** These two awards were discussed. The following discussion topics were tabled for the January meeting: 1) whether the Graduate Student Award would only be awarded to a doctoral student; and 2) new guidelines for the Teacher-as-Researcher Award. Dolores agreed to bring a plan to the January meeting and Kristen will appoint a new chair to

the Graduate Student Issues Committee.

4. **Editors for *The NERA* Researcher:** Steve will look for new *NERA Researcher* editors. Steve and Thanos will be editors starting next year if necessary.

Next Meeting: The next Board meeting will be scheduled for late January or early February depending on Board members' availability.

Meeting adjourned at 12:35.

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writing across the curriculum (Sireci, Lewis, & Martone, 2006). Although large-scale formative assessments are not well suited for providing information about specific skills recently taught (see Militello, 2004, for a discussion of formative assessments suitable for that purpose), they can be very useful for providing information for reconsidering and revising curricula.

Another way in which assessment can promote student achievement is in the setting of high standards on educational tests. This practice is controversial, but the idea is that if high standards for achievement are set, teachers will adjust their instruction to help students meet them. In our NERA poster, my son and I tracked MCAS achievement level data from 1998 to 2006 in English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics (Sireci & Sireci, 2007). We looked at grades 4, 8, and 10 and we found steady improvement in all three grades. However, the improvements at grades 4 and 8 were modest compared to the gains observed for grade 10. For example, in math, over the 8-year period, the reduction in students falling into the lowest category ("Warning" for grades 4 and 8 and "Failing" for grade 10) was about 10% for grades 4 and 8, but about 35% for grade 10. In 2006, over 90% of the grade 10 students pass the ELA and Math tests, compared to 65% (ELA) and 55% (math) in 2000, which was the year before the graduation testing requirement went into effect.

Do improvements in state test score results over time prove that tests and high standards are helping students learn? Of course the answer is no, but the results are consistent with such a claim, and it is contrary to the claim that these tests are hurting kids. MCAS data also reflect narrowing achievement gaps across Euro-American and ethnic minorities, and since the high school graduation testing requirement became effective, Massachusetts has been the highest scoring state in the country in reading and math at grades 4 and 8 on the National Assessment of Educational Progress. These data suggest educational

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reform in Massachusetts is doing more good than harm, and it is important to note that assessments are a key part of these reform efforts.

Understanding the Limitations of Tests
Up to this point, I have argued that educational tests have important uses, provide objective data, and can be used to help improve student achievement. It is important, however, to also keep the limitations of these tests in mind, because failure to do so could present several problems. Thus understanding the limitations of tests is important when developing educational assessment policies and interpreting test scores for instructional and other purposes.

Educational tests have several limitations. First, scores from these tests are only estimates of what students know and can do. The standardized testing situation is inauthentic to at least some degree and it is possible that the standardized testing conditions may inhibit students' performance relative to what they can do in the classroom and in other more natural settings. We are limited by practical factors in when and how we test students. Time, money, and resources affect the way we develop and score tests. Therefore, when interpreting scores, it is important to understand what the test covers, what it does not cover, and that there is measurement error associated with any test score.

Tests also are not necessarily good at serving multiple purposes. A test for determining students' relative strengths within the subdomains of 8th-grade math would be designed differently than a test designed to understand 8th-grade students general mathematics proficiency. A test designed to provide information about a group of students (e.g., in school or district evaluation) would also be different than a test designed to provide information at the student level. Therefore, it is important to match test design to the purposes of the assessment. We need to limit our interpretations of test scores to those inferences the test score data can support.

Steps for Ensuring Sensible Assessment Policies that can Improve Achievement
A consideration of the strengths and limitations of tests will allow us to develop educational assessment policies that are defensible, and that will help support student achievement, rather than detract from it. I propose 10 steps for developing appropriate educational assessment policies.

Step 1: Decide on the specific objectives targeted by the test, and design the testing system accordingly. The key idea here is not to expect too much from a single test. Different assessment purposes are likely to require different types of tests. These differences must be considered at the initial stage of test development. A test designed to provide national norms is not likely to provide good information about how well students meet specific educational objectives.

Step 2: Minimize the amount of time students spend taking tests. Tests take time to administer and this time competes with instructional time. I do not think we need two or more weeks to assess students' general achievement in core subject areas. The goals of assessment programs should factor in the amount of time needed to assess students. Last year, my eldest son had 11 days of assessment. That seems too much to me. Five days represents a whole week of school and might be a more reasonable upper bound.

Step 3: Make teachers part of the assessment system, rather than subordinate to it. Teachers need to be full partners in an assessment system. They are the deliverers of the instruction and consumers of the information provided and so this information must be useful to them. By engaging teachers in the testing process from the outset, we will maximize the alignment of the assessments to instruction and we will allow the teachers to have some ownership of the testing program.

Step 4: Provide multiple opportunities for students to pass high-stakes tests. When stakes have consequences, such as high school graduation, students should have multiple opportunities to take the test. In Massachusetts, the graduation requirement is based on a grade 10 test and the students can take the test twice each subsequent year until they pass. Massachusetts also has a performance appeal process where students who have good grades, but were not able to pass the test by spring of their senior year, can appeal for a diploma based on other measures of their academic competence. These are sensible and fair policies.

Step 5: Use universal test design in developing educational assessments. Universal design has been used in architecture to provide access to buildings and in many other areas of our lives (e.g., closed caption television for the hearing impaired). Universal test design involves designing the test to maximize access to it for as many types of students as possible. Universal test design characteristics include flexible time limits, flexible test administration conditions, and using test administration mediums that facilitate access (see Thompson, Thurlow, & Malouf, 2004, for more information regarding universal test design).

Step 6: Provide alternate assessments and test accommodations for the students who need them. Even when universal test design is used, standardized testing condi-

tions will not be appropriate for all students and so some students will need accommodations to access a test. Accommodations, such as alternate test locations, scribes, sign language interpreters, Braille versions, and so forth, should be provided when they are needed. In some cases, the accommodation may result in a change in what the test is measuring. If so, statements about how such scores should be interpreted will be needed.

Step 7: Listen to feedback, including criticisms. As mentioned earlier, not all criticisms of educational tests are exaggerations. We need to pay particular attention to criticisms involving whether the tests are measuring the right skills, and whether tests are classifying students correctly with respect to the achievement levels. It is only by listening to the valid criticisms, and doing research to evaluate them, that we can improve our tests.

Step 8: Perform validation research. Listening to testing criticisms should provide some good hypotheses to test in validation research, but there are certainly many validity issues that should be researched from the outset. The Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing (American Educational Research Association, American Psychological Association, & National Council on Measurement in Education, 1999), provide us with five sources of validity evidence to investigate—test content, internal structure, relations with other variables, response processes, and testing consequences. All testing programs should gather and document sufficient evidence that test scores are valid for their intended purposes. Only then can we defend our assessment policies.

Step 9: Document the strengths and limitations of a testing program. Carrying out validity studies will not inform assessment policy if the studies are not documented. In writing up these studies, it is important to do so in a way educators and educational policy makers can understand.

Step 10: Take advantage of computer technology. Computer technology has a lot to offer educational assessment such as the ability to assess knowledge and skills not assessable using paper-based tests (Sireci & Zenisky, 2006), and the ability to tailor the tests to individual students using computerized-adaptive testing (Wainer, 2000). Putting tests on computer also helps increase student engagement in testing, since students seem to value time spent on the computer.

Closing Remarks

Educational tests have their strengths and limitations. Currently, we have some proponents of tests who focus on their strengths and many testing critics who focus on

their limitations. A smaller number of critics exaggerate these limitations. Focusing on only strengths or weaknesses is not likely to be productive with respect to improving instruction and student achievement. We need to consider both and we need to realize the benefits quality assessment can bring to education. We must also involve teachers to the fullest extent possible in our assessment initiatives. Such involvement begins with assessment policy and assessment design. When the testing and teaching communities come together to develop assessments, the end result will be tests that are aligned with instruction and that provide accurate data to inform teachers, students, parents, and policy makers.

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Membership Report

A total of 254 members joined or renewed for the 2007-08 membership year and 236 members attended the conference.

- **Professional Members:** 159 members
  (150 conference attendees)

- **Retired Members:** 6 members
  (5 conference attendees)

- **Student Members:** 88 members
  (80 conference attendees; 69 paper presenters).