

A time of testing: "If we're going to test, we must invest"

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Unlike in Lake Wobegon, not all students in the U.S. are above average—nor are all schools. Some students are failing to acquire the minimal competence they need, which means that some schools are also failing. President Bush's call for nationwide annual testing in reading and math is designed to identify those schools.

Though versions of his plan have passed both houses of Congress, politicians of all stripes are nervous about how the test results will be reported, since none of them wants to see their district or state rated as unsuccessful. If it were a Democrat rather than Republican president pushing federally mandated school testing, many self-styled conservatives would doubtless be decrying "big government" and complaining that a national curriculum was in the works. As it is, conservatives have responded positively to Bush's demand for school "accountability," especially since they tend to think public schools and particularly inner-city schools are falling down on the job.

Regardless of the politics of implementing nationwide testing, it is a project that promises to improve the debate on education. If the federal government is to evaluate schools as Bush intends, it will have to use a uniform measurement that allows for comparison from district to district and state to state. (Just what that measurement will be is a subject for the House and Senate conference committees.) And the application of such a nationwide criteria lays the groundwork for a new national debate on what schools are failing and why, a debate based on data on comparative performance.

Where the debate goes from there will be crucial. How can the poorly performing schools be improved? We suspect that the data will show that the schools that are having trouble meeting the standards are relatively low on funds. We also suspect that at most schools improving student performance will entail creating smaller classes, hiring more teachers, developing more early-intervention programs, and

offering more summer courses—all of which costs money. Are the politicians who call for minimum standards now willing to provide the funds that schools need to reach those standards?

Senator Paul Wellstone of Minnesota pressed that point when he tried—unsuccessfully—to amend Bush’s education bill so as to delay mandatory testing until the federal government increases the amount of money it sends to schools in low-income districts. “If we’re going to test, we must invest,” he said.

Bush has eloquently and aptly spoken of the “soft bigotry of low expectations.” The nation does need to have high standards for all students, and mandatory testing can help in reaching those standards. But it will be manifestly unfair to press those standards while denying students and schools the resources to meet them.