



A Broader, **BOLDER** Approach to Education

A Broader, Bolder Approach to Education Statement Regarding President Obama's Denunciation of Excess in the Use of Standardized Testing

President Obama's recent remarks establish principles for testing and accountability that all can support as the basis for re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. On March 28, in response to a question by a Washington, D.C. high school student, "Could you reduce the amount of tests?" the President stated:

Well, I think probably what you're referring to are standardized tests -- because if you're just talking about your math or your science or your English test, tough luck -- (laughter) -- you've got to keep on taking those tests, because that's part of the way that teachers are going to know whether you're making progress and whether you understand the subject matter.

What is true, though, is, is that we have piled on a lot of standardized tests on our kids. Now, there's nothing wrong with a standardized test being given occasionally just to give a baseline of where kids are at. Malia and Sasha, my two daughters, they just recently took a standardized test. But it wasn't a high-stakes test. It wasn't a test where they had to panic. I mean, they didn't even really know that they were going to take it ahead of time. They didn't study for it, they just went ahead and took it. And it was a tool to diagnose where they were strong, where they were weak, and what the teachers needed to emphasize.

Too often what we've been doing is using these tests to punish students or to, in some cases, punish schools. And so what we've said is let's find a test that everybody agrees makes sense; let's apply it in a less pressured-packed atmosphere; let's figure out whether we have to do it every year or whether we can do it maybe every several years; and let's make sure that that's not the only way we're judging whether a school is doing well.

Because there are other criteria: What's the attendance rate? How are young people performing in terms of basic competency on projects? There are other ways of us measuring whether students are doing well or not.

So what I want to do is -- one thing I never want to see happen is schools that are just teaching to the test. Because then you're not learning about the world; you're not learning about different cultures, you're not learning about science, you're not learning about math. All you're learning about is how to fill out a little bubble on an exam and the little tricks that you need to do in order to take a test. And that's not going to make education interesting to you. And young people do well in stuff that they're interested in. They're not going to do as well if it's boring.

These points reflect appropriate concerns regarding high-pressure standardized tests, including the consequent narrowing of the curriculum, the failure to gauge important “higher-order” skills and capacities, and student disengagement. However, the President’s statements seem to conflict with Administration policy in both its “Race to the Top” program and in its proposals for re-authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and Congressional leaders should now re-examine these policies and proposals in light of the principles that President Obama has articulated.

- 1) The Administration has urged in its prominent *Race to the Top* initiative that teachers be evaluated in part, and sometimes in large part, by the annual growth of their students’ standardized test scores. This will not be possible if standardized tests are administered “every several years.”
- 2) Likewise, the Administration has proposed retaining the requirement of the *No Child Left Behind Act* that students be tested annually in math and reading. This requirement has, as the president suggested, led to “schools that are just teaching to the test” and to students learning “little tricks” rather than rich, meaningful content and skills, and it should be abandoned.
- 3) The Administration has proposed that the bottom 5 percent of schools be subject to drastic “turnaround” reforms, including firing all or most of their teachers and principals. Given the importance cited by the President of measures of student performance such as “basic competency on projects” and “other ways [besides standardized tests of] “measuring whether students are doing well or not,” no school should be identified as failing without considering such a balanced group of indicators.

The President clearly understands well the importance of evidence-based education policies that will engage students and elevate teachers as professionals. These insightful points should guide Administration policy, as well as the thinking of all those concerned with improving U.S. education.

Helen Ladd
Pedro Noguera
Tom Payzant
Co-chairs, A Broader Bolder Approach to Education
(www.boldapproach.org)

March 31, 2011