

IF I WERE AMERICA'S ASSESSMENT CZAR*

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If I were America's Assessment Czar, unlike my long-deceased Russian counterparts, I would have scant fear of revolution. On the contrary, I would deliberately attempt to foment one. U.S. educational assessment is in such serious trouble that a full-blown insurrection is surely required. Thus, a revolution-oriented czar is precisely what America's educational assessment now needs. It would be my honor and, frankly, my pleasure to lead an uprising against how this nation currently tests its students.

My revolution would be a comprehensive one, reaching into all of our assessment's nooks and crannies. Space limitations preclude my describing the full range of my measurement mandates, but I can briefly describe three of the more important decrees I would issue. Those decrees deal with *educational accountability*, *affective assessment*, and *assessment literacy*. I'll now describe what I would require regarding each of these three issues. And remember, when any sort of worthwhile Czar commands that his subjects "jump," they are only permitted to inquire about the specific elevation he has in mind.

Instructionally Supportive Accountability Tests

My first Czarly decree would be the following:

Any test used for purposes of educational accountability must also be instructionally supportive.

America's policymakers want students' performances on standardized examinations to serve as the chief evidence to indicate whether public-school educators are doing a good job. That's reasonable, because citizens supply the taxes that allow those schools to operate. As America's Assessment Czar, I would be in total support of federal, state, or even local accountability tests. But if any of those tests were *not* instructionally supportive, I would have such tests sent to the royal shredder. Accountability tests that aren't instructionally supportive cause educational harm to students. I would command that such tests be expunged.

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Let's look for a moment at the nature of an instructionally supportive test. Such a test helps teachers do a better job of teaching their students. It must possess three qualities. First, the curricular aims it intends to assess must be described (usually in some sort of separate document) with sufficient clarity so that teachers will understand the nature of the skills and/or knowledge to be measured by the test. Second, an instructionally supportive test must measure only a modest number of curricular aims. If a test attempts to assess so many assessment targets that teachers become overwhelmed, those teachers will pay insufficient attention to those too-numerous assessment targets. Finally, an instructionally supportive test provides teachers, students, and students' parents with results that can be employed to improve instruction. That is, the scores from such a test will indicate *which* of the assessed curricular aims have or haven't been mastered by each student.

An instructionally supportive test, therefore, (1) helps teachers know where they need to head instructionally, (2) doesn't overwhelm those teachers with too many curricular targets, and (3) provides results so that teachers can determine which parts of their instruction worked. Instructionally supportive tests will improve what goes on in classrooms. However, if a test lacks *even one* of these three attributes, it is *not* instructionally supportive. Such tests, by definition, will not support instruction.

When a test is used for accountability purposes, such as the statewide standardized tests that will be employed to comply with the No Child Left Behind Act, that test invariably becomes a *high-stakes, instruction-altering* test. Teachers, pressured to raise their students' scores on such tests, often succumb to classroom instructional practices that are educationally unsound.

Three such harmful educational practices are (1) *curricular reductionism* wherein teachers curricularly short-change their students by teaching only toward content they believe will be measured by an accountability test, (2) *excessive test-preparation* where we see teachers forcing their students to take part in seemingly endless test-preparation drills that sap the joy from learning, and (3) *modeled dishonesty* that occurs when teachers, pressured to boost students' test scores, engage in blatantly unethical test-preparation or test-administration. These three test-triggered practices harm children, sometimes irreparably. This Czar would stop them.

I shall decree that all U.S. educational accountability tests must, without exception, be instructionally supportive. For those who are unfamiliar with the way that instructionally supportive accountability tests should be created, I shall require them to read, with comprehension, several reports produced under the auspices of the Commission on Instructionally Supportive Assessment.* Those who violate this reading assignment will be punished severely. Siberia, after all, is still chilly.

*Copies of such reports are downloadable at any of the following websites: www.aasa.org, www.naesp.org, www.principals.org, www.nea.org, www.nmsa.org.

Affective Assessment

My second Czarly decree would be this:

Local school districts must be provided with self-report inventories assessing educationally important, noncontroversial attitudes and interests.

Student affect is patently important. If a student learns how to perform mathematical operations with great skill, but also learns to detest all things mathematical, this constitutes an educational calamity. On the other hand, if teachers can promote students' positive attitudes toward learning *per se*, then that affective disposition will incline those students to become life-long learners. We want students to *enjoy* leisure reading. We want students to be *confident* that they can write an effective letter to a governmental agency. Yes, this Czar regards student affect as an educational variable of substantial significance—a variable of such significance that teachers should be able to find out what impact, if any, their instruction is having on their students' affect.

Accordingly, I shall direct both federal and state agencies to make available to local school districts a meaningful array of age-appropriate affective self-report inventories. These brief inventories would all deal with educationally significant variables (for example, students' interest in subjects such as science and math), but would *never* deal with any affective variables apt to be regarded as controversial and, therefore, inappropriate for assessment in our public schools. For instance, the inventories would not assess any sort of student values dealing with controversial social or political issues. Such values are surely the province of the home, not the school.

Moreover, all of these affective inventories must be completed with total anonymity by students. That is, students would fill out those inventories using only check-marks, never writing their name or any other comments on the inventories. Inventories would be collected so as to preclude tracing any student's responses back to that student. If students recognize that their responses are genuinely anonymous, their responses will be more candid.

However, the need for anonymity makes it clear that only *group-focused inferences* can be drawn from students' completed inventories. Such inferences, of course, can be remarkably useful to teachers. If Ms. Scroggins, a 10th grade English teacher, discovers from the results of an affective inventory that her students (*her students as a group*) are becoming increasingly less confident in their ability to write narrative essays, then those results send a signal to Ms. Scroggins that she needs to modify what she's doing instructionally. Group-focused affective inferences can help teachers do a better educational job.

However, a careful reading of my second Czarly decree reveals that these governmentally supplied affective inventories will only be made *available* to local school districts. Whether these assessment resources are actually used, of course, will be totally in the hands of a district's decision-makers. Use of these new affective assessment inventories must be totally *optional*. A local school board, then, would have at its disposal a collection of brief, refined self-report inventories that could be used to supply group-focused insights about important aspects of students' education. .

Assessment Literacy

Here's my third and final Czarly decree:

A massive, governmentally sponsored program to enhance the assessment literacy of both educators and non-educators must be provided for the next five years.

The reason for this last decree is all too obvious. Educational testing has become an enormously significant undertaking in this nation. Test-based decisions are being made about the way our children are being educated, and those decisions are almost certain to have a meaningful impact on our society. Relatively few educators, however, and almost no non-educator citizens, are familiar with the basics of educational assessment. As a consequence, in recent years we have witnessed a flock of unwise educational decisions that were made because the wrong sorts of tests were employed to support those decisions.

In only a dozen or so of our states must teachers complete a formal course in educational assessment prior to licensure. That should change. But because of such deficits in their preparation, at this moment the majority of American educators are truly *assessment illiterates*. That situation needs to be rectified immediately via a full-fledged, governmentally supported campaign to increase the assessment moxie of those who run our nation's schools.

But American education is too important to leave it to the educators. Citizens and policymakers also need to learn more about what sorts of tests should/shouldn't be used for such purposes as evaluating the quality of our schools. Parents surely need to understand the rationale for the test-based decisions being made about their children. Thus, in addition to a formidable *educator-focused* program promoting assessment literacy, there would be serious governmental support of a nationwide program designed to help U.S. citizens learn the essentials of educational assessment. An assessment-enlightened citizenry, working in harmony with an assessment-enlightened educational profession, can move our nation's educational system forward during this current accountability-engulfed era.

Final Fiat

Well, there you have an idea about several of the revolutionary changes I'd make if I were, indeed, America's Assessment Czar. Will those three edicts, if implemented with zeal, instantly transform U.S. public schooling from a context of crisis to an Olympian garden of Socratic bliss? Of course not. But, because those three changes would surely help, let's get the rebellion rolling. I command it!