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Universal testing could reveal unequal schooling

AN EMERALD EDITORIAL

Standardized testing could be a valuable tool for improving the education system, but only if properly implemented

So, it appears President Clinton's latest bold education proposal is dead. The Republicans seem to have ground standardized testing out of existence.

We aren't sure what to think. Clearly, standardized testing had the potential to be a useful indicator of how well America's schools were educating students. It also had the potential to justify a lot of bad education policy.

If used correctly, standardized testing would have been a source of valuable data. Few efforts have been made to measure the performance of every school in every region of the country by one standard scale.

Currently, the closest thing to a universal gauge of student performance is the SAT. Obviously, a standardized college entrance exam is not a good measure of how the average student is doing.

Not only do many students not take the SAT, but it also measures only the performance of one age group. That group has already received whatever benefit or harm it will get from the school system; the data will serve little purpose now.

Additionally, standardized tests like the SAT don't measure the most important skills. The SAT is designed to measure reasoning ability and scholastic potential more than literacy or basic math ability. It is also argued by many groups that the SAT contains a certain cultural bias that would make a similar test ineffective at comparing minority performance to the national average.

Unfortunately, the Republican leaders who opposed the idea of a national test have suggested that by simply modifying existing private tests like the SAT, the objectives a standardized test would fulfill could be met. This would be standardized testing of the worst sort.

In addition, if a standardized test was simply used as a way to gauge

student performance without consideration of the many factors that go into education, it could prove dangerous. The results could easily be used to condemn certain schools or systems without considering the community in which the school functions.

For example, inner-city schools would likely score lower on the test despite spending more money on their students. This doesn't mean the money is wasted or that the schools need to be streamlined; rather, it is a reminder that students in dense urban areas often face more educational obstacles than those in suburbs.

More dangerous, if a standardized test were used as a sort of universal exam to decide whether students pass, many children would be discouraged and even driven from the school system. The idea of the test would be to ensure students had certain necessary skills, but without accompanying changes in the school system itself, the effect of the exam would be to lower the educational level of many underprivileged students.

Nevertheless, a standardized test could also prove to be a tremendously valuable tool in reforming the education system. The Republicans fear a standardized test would put schools one step closer to federal control, something they oppose.

In reality, federal restrictions on school programs and standards could prove beneficial. Currently, the local control communities have over their schools leads to dangerous inequalities in education.

We certainly don't want communities to lose control of their children's education. Different communities have different goals and different needs, and the variety of systems in place allows for increased experimentation.

What we would like people to recognize

is that a system that relies entirely on community funding and standards inevitably fails those students who grow up in poor, badly educated areas. Standardized testing could point out these inequalities and force states to boost funding of urban schools.

It isn't enough to ensure that each district gets the same amount of money per student, as is currently the case in Oregon. Rather, districts with students who have fewer opportunities at home or greater educational needs should receive increased funding, something standardized testing could help bring about.

The very fact that Republicans op-

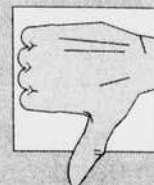
pose standardized testing is a good indicator that it could benefit students who are at a current educational disadvantage. Those students and their parents aren't the voters who picked Republican candidates or who donated thousands of dollars to the Republican causes.

Instead of abandoning voters who can't afford to buy federal support, we should break with history and begin to reform schools in a way that would allow students to break out of the cycle of poverty in which they are currently trapped.

This editorial represents the opinion of the Emerald editorial board. Responses may be sent to ode@oregon.uoregon.edu



Thumbs



TO A NEW YORK MAN:

A New Yorker is accused of deliberately infecting more than a dozen women with HIV. Such a crime has precedent, but it is no less horrific. The fact that AIDS has linked death and sex in people's minds is saddening; people who deliberately worsen this association by using sex as a deadly weapon are nauseating.



TO THE HOUSE:

A U.S. House committee investigating cases of so-called "Gulf War Syndrome" recently denounced Pentagon investigators and called for an independent review. The committee claimed the military was covering up or ignoring the possibility that soldiers who have complained about a variety of symptoms since returning from the Persian Gulf conflict might have come into contact with chemical or biological weapons. The panel felt this was a likely possibility and, because of the reluctance of the military to investigate, the possible link between chemical weapons and illness should be independently examined. Because we have almost no trust in the military's ability to protect its soldiers, we think an independent examination is a good idea.

DRAWING BOARD

