

[Education Week's blogs](#) > [Assessing the Assessments](#)

Wasting the Lessons of Assessment History

By Invited Contributor Listed Below on April 15, 2014 12:07 AM | [No comments](#)

Today's guest contributor is **Mort Sherman**, Superintendent-in-Residence, American Association of School Administrators.

First Lady Michelle Obama recently talked off the record to students in China. [According to the Washington Post](#), a senior White House official who was in the meeting agreed to tell reporters about the meeting on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the discussion. "The discussion included a critique of standardized testing... The group, including Obama, agreed that tests track only one measure of a student's potential."

I don't know why that firm grasp of the obvious is such a sensitive topic, but there it is: a clear and concise statement about the practical use of standardized tests.

It seems that it would not be a stretch at all for the First Lady to make an analogy between standardized assessments and her wonderful health initiative. Putting children on a scale to make a conclusive statement about their health would be a serious over interpretation of limited data, similar to the abuse of using students' standardized test scores as the sole basis for a judgment about the achievement of children, schools, or teachers.

This is not to say that use of assessments and data is all wrong. Data can and should help inform policy and practice. For example, a major report was just released by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights. "In a first analysis in nearly 15 years of information from all of the country's 97,000 public schools, the Education Department found a pattern of inequality on a number of fronts, with race as the dividing factor," according to the [New York Times](#).

This is big news, but it is not new news. What have we learned since *Brown v. Topeka* or the Civil Rights Act? Assessments and the resulting troubling data are central to *Inequality, A Place Called School, A Nation At Risk, Standardized Minds*, and other significant publications over the past 60 years.

So not only do we have questions about the international use and abuse of standardized assessments, but we in the United States also have a history of not paying attention to meaningful analyses of data.

Maybe we aren't asking the right questions. Let's start with some direct questions about what we have learned from ILSAs (international large-scale assessments) and from recent U.S. studies. While we continue to work and complain in an effort to change the current assessment landscape, let's also be sure that we know what we have learned and should focus on once the dust of failed and fallen policies has cleared.

Assessments over several decades indicate that we have many successes in public education yet so much more to do. The disparities in learning among our children are heart wrenching. The percent of poor children has increased as the achievement gap has remained. The long-studied achievement gap along racial lines has not lessened. Will more and more rigorous assessments close these gaps? I don't think so.

While we argue about what kind and how many assessments should be employed, and worry about their appropriate use, we are not focused on what assessments are doing to and for our children. We must come together in common cause to learn from the success and failure of our present practices so that we focus on closing the learning gaps which threaten our democracy.

A simple proposal: the time spent on assessments which track only one measure of a student's potential should be refocused on a larger vision. We need to ask the question: How do we make certain that we are educating all children to be active participants in a democracy? Able to use the power of their voices to solve the problems of this increasingly more complex world? Able to engage with compelling ideas? Able to work with dignity and enjoy the freedom of options as they join the work force?

These are important questions that go beyond academic achievement. This does not mean more assessments... it may mean fewer or different ones using broader and more meaningful indicators. We might want to look more closely at how we see the growth of students'

dispositions such as persistence, self regulation, and self evaluation. Whatever it is that we do with assessing academic learning, we must put equal attention to dispositional learning--developing students who know how to respond when the answer to a problem is not immediately accessible.

This suggests life beyond the efficiently scored tests that we are so dependent on. To answer the larger questions, we must find a better balance with the human side of the measuring scale. We cannot afford to lose the cognitive capital of the next generation.

We may well be on a path of addressing what to do about assessments while missing this ripe moment to change what we do to improve learning for all children. If we don't use the data gathered through assessments over these many years in a wise and measured way on behalf of the children we serve, we will have once again wasted the lessons of history.

Mort Sherman

American Association of School Administrators

Categories: [Validity](#) [High-stakes testing](#) [School accountability](#) [International assessments](#) [Test use](#)

Tags: [accountability](#) [achievement gap](#) [assessments](#) [ILSA](#) [International Large-Scale Assessments](#)