



It's Time to Teach and Test Outside the Box

Stuart Kahl, Ph.D.
President & CEO
Measured Progress

In education circles these days, there's a lot of discussion about the virtually limitless potential of technology to transform the twenty-first century classroom. As exciting as the new technological delivery systems are, perhaps we need to take a fresh look at what is being delivered—and to whom. Specifically, is defining the content and skills we're teaching strictly according to age and grade a realistic approach in a standards-based educational system?

Let's take a look backward. In the mass-production-oriented, industrial society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, using age/grade to group students and define the curriculum was the most expedient and effective way overall to serve the educational needs of a burgeoning student population. In more recent times, everything from the reporting of normative grade equivalent scores on tests to ongoing, direct observation have shown that kids in any particular grade are "years" apart in terms of achievement. So why do we persist in grouping them strictly by age and limiting everyone in a group to a single grade's curriculum?

Standards-based testing and reporting focus on achievement of content and skills—not performance compared to a grade-specific norming group. Yet grade-level content is still embraced and indeed mandated. For example, the United States Department of Education does not allow "out-of-grade-level" testing for students with special needs. The main concern about this practice, according to special education experts, is the appropriateness of contexts—we should ask teenagers about CDs, not teddy bears. I agree completely on the issue of contexts. But the reality is, many students with moderate to severe cognitive disabilities are working on concepts and skills most kids their age learn years earlier.

As states expanded their content standards to grade-level expectations (GLEs) for all NCLB-tested grades, many

had to go back to tweak one grade's GLEs to make them seem different from those for an adjacent grade. All too often, this practice created artificial distinctions and unnecessary test alignment challenges. The concepts of standards-based education and strict grade definitions appear to be contradictory.

Wouldn't it be better to focus instruction and assessment on learning continua corresponding to a few central or core concepts—independent of grade level—within each of the three or four strands in a subject area? Each well-defined continuum would contain increasingly sophisticated content and skills and would span many grade levels. I'd like to see student test results that look like the graphic equalizer for a sound system and that show where the student performs with respect to each continuum. Such an approach to testing and reporting would certainly be more informative than separate grade-level tests that have been statistically equated to form a vertical scale after the fact. It would also serve as a far better basis for growth models, which are currently so popular.

It's time to move beyond allowing grade levels to constrict curricula. Technology offers many tools to make individualized instruction and effective growth monitoring more attainable than ever before. As educators we need to reach students where they are and to recognize that they aren't all in the same place at the same time.

What do you think?

Let us know at twocents@measuredprogress.org



**The Measured Progress Difference
It's all about student learning. Period.**