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OP-ED

AS YOU WERE SAYING

Standardized tests aren't likely to set desired standard

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There has been a tremendous amount of media attention on this year's first mandated teacher tests in Massachusetts. The combination of teacher bashing and let's-get-tough rhetoric plays well to a public concerned about the state of our public schools.

Then that was followed rapidly by release of the state's MCAS scores.

There is no doubt in my mind that it's time for higher standards in our public schools. We do our young people the worst kind of disservice by passing them along year after year, and pretending they're doing fine when they're not.

But what's missing in the current debate over test scores?

If all of the noise is, in fact, about improving student achievement and, more specifically, student achievement among those who are currently not succeeding, are standardized tests the magic bullet?

We forget that these tests measure results, at best, in a limited way. They are not in themselves tools for improving teaching and learning. If we were as concerned with a high level of heart disease, for example, as we are with such a high level of academic failing, I hope we wouldn't simply be shouting for more sophisticated monitoring equipment.

I believe we have lost sight of how standardized tests - whether for teachers or students - are an isolated attempt to capture what has been learned on a piece of paper with a No. 2 pencil. There are truckloads of research showing that the most effective teachers are those who connect with their students, challenge them and care about them. Can such skills as these be captured by a paper-and-pencil test taken in an auditorium one day?

There is also plenty of research showing that students achieve to the level expected of them. Can a standardized test capture knowledge that was never taught to those students whom so many of us have written off before they even reach high school?

This is not to say that some skills cannot be accurately measured with standardized tests, nor that a basic set of technical skills should not be required of teachers to teach and of students to graduate from high school. But let's put the test mania into perspective. Let's acknowledge the host of vital qualities required for success in teaching and learning that can never be captured by a standardized test - qualities in high demand in the work force such as teamwork, creative problem-solving, communication with diverse audiences. Let's refocus the debate on a few simple questions:

What would it look like if our teachers and students were succeeding?

What are the skills needed to get there?

Then let's ask:

What are the most appropriate ways to assess if we've got it right?

If we take the questions in this order, we may realize that standardized tests are not the magic bullet. We may realize that our search for a quick fix in the form of standardized tests is an overly simple solution to a very complicated problem. We may realize that the results we are after need to be captured in a variety of ways, and that the true value of this information is in how we use it to support continued improvement in our public schools.

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