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SCHOOLS / *There's no way a national test can be fair to all students, or even useful. What counts is student ability, not the school, and high test scores would depend on the affluence and family stability of the nearby communities*

Why national tests won't improve education

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RECENT government and business reports express concern about the quality of Canadian schools. They propose to improve education by introducing national testing of students, reporting results by province or school, and letting families send their children to the schools with the highest test scores.

This assumes that test results can be used directly to assess the quality of schools and teaching. Canada's teachers oppose these measures, for three major reasons.

1) Under the Canadian Constitution, provinces have the power to determine what shall be taught to children. Local districts can in turn adapt the curriculum to the needs of their students. Any national test, no matter how well designed, will inevitably omit topics that some provinces value highly, and include others that some do not emphasize. Results will therefore favour the province whose curriculum most closely resembles the one implied by the test questions.

There is no national consensus about a curriculum that must be taught to all students. Therefore, no national test can be designed that is fair to all.

2) Research indicates that the most powerful influence on test scores is a student's capacity to learn. That capacity reflects not only innate ability, but also the impact of poverty, the educational level of parents,

language first learned, mental, physical and emotional health, and racial discrimination. Anyone who expects students who are disadvantaged, impoverished, undernourished, neglected or severely disabled to score at the same level as students who are affluent, healthy, well cared for or able is doomed to disappointment.

Test results, to be useful, must include enough background information to identify the groups of students who most need help.

But current plans by Canada's Council of Ministers of Education to conduct national tests do not include collecting background data on the social and economic characteristics of the students. It is therefore unlikely that the results will provide any useful information on ways to improve education.

3) Test scores reported by schools will not give parents adequate information about those schools, since the major factor that determines the scores is the characteristics of the students attending the school, not the school itself.

This can easily be verified by leaving the staff in place in the highest and lowest performing schools, and by switching students. Unless all the research of the past 50 years is wrong, the test scores would move with the students rather than stay with the teachers.

THOSE who want to find the schools with the highest test scores need not go to

the expense and trouble of national testing. They need only obtain census data on the relative affluence and family stability of the communities surrounding various schools.

Even if the highest-scoring school could be found, entrance requirements would soon need to be established to prevent overcrowding. The selection would inevitably lead to much greater segregation of students from advantaged and disadvantaged backgrounds, and violate the principles of democracy and equality of opportunity that underlie Canadian education.

The disadvantaged would be further harmed if low-scoring schools were punished for their "ineffectiveness" by having their funding cut.

Those who advocate national testing and school choice should become more familiar with the objectives of education and the research on student achievement in this country. They might find that the principal purpose of the schools is to offer all students equality of educational opportunity. They might learn that tests are imperfect and easily misinterpreted. Credible research on effective schools compares results only where the characteristics of the student populations are the same.

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The article EM9301 reprinted above is used in Figure 11.3b of the STAT 221 Course Materials.