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Beyond Testing: 7 Assessments of Students & Schools More Effective Than Standardized Tests

By Deborah Meier and Matthew Knoester

**Reviewed by Daniel J. Quinn, Ph.D.
Independent Scholar**

In *Beyond Testing: 7 Assessments of Students & Schools More Effective Than Standardized Tests* (2017), Deborah Meier and Matthew Knoester explore several alternative ways to assess students' knowledge. The authors make a case that current practices used to assess learning in schools are reduced to a single test score, and argue they should be replaced with more effective methods that gauge what students actually know. Standardized tests are but one way to measure academic success.

This book arrives at an important time, when public support for standardized testing has been waning and policy makers across the country have begun to seek alternative measures of student and school success. Last year, a Phi Delta Kappan poll (Richardson, et al., 2017, pp. 23-25) reported that only 42% of adults sampled said performance on standardized tests was a highly important indicator of school quality. Similarly, the poll showed just 49% of public school parents believed standardized tests were important. These results, combined with new federal rules provided under the Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA), offer a basis for local and state policy makers to begin to reimagine accountability plans and investigate alternative measures (including non-cognitive factors) of school and student success. If not tests, then what? This conversation is one that local and state policy makers should be having when implementing state plans under the ESSA. With greater flexibility and local control, state and local policy makers will have an opportunity to engage communities and parents and dig deeper into what different measures tell us about student learning.

While advocating for alternative measures of school quality and student success, Meier and Knoester provide concise and useful descriptions of seven possible alternative assessments to the standardized tests used in school. Meier, a noted progressive school leader and writer for more than 50 years, has spent her career advocating for democratic collaboration within schools, while Knoester, an associate professor at Ripon College, researches the multiple purposes of education with a focus on the democratic origins of public education in the U.S. Both authors have an extensive background in school leadership and have been writing for years about the multiple, varied purposes of education in the U.S. and the various problems associated with the accountability reforms enacted since the early 2000s. They are experts with decades of experience in the field. In *Beyond Testing*, they ground their recommendations in personal experiences working in democratically organized schools, as well as in the practices advocated by progressive workgroups (such as the New York Performance Standards Consortium) that navigate accountability requirements while seeking alternatives to testing.

Meier's celebrated Mission Hill School, a small magnet school in Boston focused on the types of assessments of learning advocated for in *Beyond Testing*, serves as exemplar for many of the ideas shared throughout the book. Meier was one of the school's founders, and Knoester taught at the school. In a previous book, *In Schools We Trust* (2002), Meier explained how high-stakes tests, the type criticized in *Beyond Testing*, affected schools like Mission Hill. Meier had hoped to create an atmosphere in her school where learning happens in communities based on trust, but found that standardized tests and accountability were moving the conversations away from students and learning. Schools like Mission Hill are impacted by test-based accountability despite their efforts to organize schools differently and de-emphasize standardized tests.

The primary conclusions of the book are straightforward: Standardized tests oversimplify the types of learning that occur in school, and the information generated by tests reduces the quality of information available to students, teachers, parents, and communities. Many of the test-based reforms in schools today are the result of policy makers imposing top-down reforms on schools without seeking input from educators in the field. The theory or logic model of these reforms is that school performance is lagging and teachers and schools need to be held accountable for student learning.

In *Beyond Testing*, the authors stress the need for a flipped model, a more democratic (bottom-up) approach, to school reform in the U.S., which could enable communities to have more informed conversations about the type of learning taking place in schools. They envision school officials fostering expanded, enriched learning opportunities and dialogues for all students. Ultimately, the authors argue, local school communities should be in charge of what gets tested and how. Meier and Knoester do not call for abandoning accountability altogether, but rather offer suggestions for making accountability requirements more informative for communities and parents. They understand that accountability is still necessary in many schools and call on school and district leaders to demonstrate and encourage informed decision-making in practice. Rather than implementing testing to meet federal or state guidelines, Meier and Knoester advocate for performance-based assessment results that spur collaborative conversations, much like they have practiced, in schools.

Expanded Reading on Testing

Meier and Knoester are not the only scholars investigating testing alternatives in the U.S. For example, Anya Kamentez, in *The Test: Why Our Schools Are Obsessed with Standardized Testing — But You Don't Have To Be* (2015), explores the history of standardized testing and what would happen if we eliminated high-stakes tests. Her investigation addresses arguments for and against testing and provides fodder for expanding the definition of accountability to produce additional information that can help teachers and students learn. Whereas Meier and Knoester approach their work from the view of educators, Kamenetz attacks the subject from her perspectives as a journalist and parent, seeking to learn more about the topic and highlight promising work being done to improve high-stakes tests.

Jack Schneider's *Beyond Test Scores: A Better Way to Measure School Quality* (2017a), is another important offering in this genre and describes other ways educators could measure school performance in order to truly understand the characteristics of a successful school.

Schneider, assistant professor of education at the University of Massachusetts Lowell, is an education historian and director of research for the Massachusetts Consortium for Innovative Education Assessment (MCIEA). His approach complements the recommendations offered by Meier and Knoester, which are described in more detail below, as he examines the key question: “What if, instead of relying on test scores, which seem destined to present urban schools in negative light, parents had rich and accurate information about the quality of America’s schools?” (Schneider, 2017b, para. 15). He says test scores in their current form provide an inaccurate picture of what good schools look like and argues that relying on them potentially harms, in particular, urban schools (which face a host of issues tied to family and neighborhood factors) and increases segregation. According to Schneider, test scores and other metrics based on test scores perpetuate historically societal problems such as race and economic mobility.

Finally, in *The Testing Charade: Pretending to Make Schools Better* (2017), Daniel Koretz, an advocate for accountability reform and Harvard professor, outlines why standardized testing has failed in recent decades to produce intended results. He concludes that if the past two decades of reform have resulted in no meaningful changes in achievement or outcomes, educators should reconsider use of these tests, and argues that test-based accountability has been abused by policy makers and needs to be revisited with more rigorous and effective accountability. Koretz recommends that policy makers expand the measures used to determine school success and provide multiple, varied opportunities for schools to demonstrate achievement.

Summary and Contents

In *Beyond Testing*, Meier and Knoester provide well-defined alternatives for assessing student learning at the school level. Most importantly for readers, the book provides a concise list of options for those seeking to assess learning in ways that can address the democratic purposes of schooling. Examples include: teacher observations of student work, reading and math interviews, school reviews by outside experts, and performance-based assessments.

After discussing the democratic imperatives for education, the authors chronicle the type of assessments they would like to see schools employ, including assessments that are: (a) more descriptive; (b) collaborative; (c) knowledge-focused; and (d) adaptable for better decision-making at the local level. Meier and Knoester summarize their personal experiences with testing and describe how other assessments—besides high-stakes tests—of school and student success would more wisely inform instruction, assist teachers, and provide helpful data for parents and communities to make decisions.

The arguments provided by Meier and Knoester in *Beyond Testing* can serve as a warning about the dangers of overreliance on high-stakes testing for school accountability. The central position of the book is that high-stakes testing and the ways in which it has been implemented in recent decades have been harmful to students and schools: “In retrospect, we [society] should have known much sooner that depending on high-stakes standardized tests for accountability in schools was not inevitable or desirable” (p. 7). They add that continuing the use of standardized tests in their current form is inherently dangerous and “continues to cause considerable harm” (p. 8).

Regarding the recommendations for moving beyond testing, Meier and Knoester make the bold claim that “each of these assessments [in the book] is more effective than standardized tests” (p. 14). The seven alternatives to high-stakes testing are outlined in Chapters 3 through 9, and include:

- (1) Student self-assessments (rubrics, checklists, self-reflections);
- (2) Teacher observations of students and their work (teachers documenting the work in their classrooms ethnographically);
- (3) A descriptive review process (discussions about what learning looks like);
- (4) Reading and math interviews with students;
- (5) Portfolios and public defenses of student work;
- (6) School reviews by outside experts; and
- (7) School board and New England-style town meetings (more collaborative and open meetings).

Each recommendation is supported by rich personal accounts and stories that outline why the alternative form of assessment potentially provides better information than standardized tests. For example, in Chapter 5, Meier and Knoester outline how portfolios and the public defense of student work can be used to better assess and strengthen student learning. Meanwhile, Chapter 10, by Ann Cook and Phyllis Tashlik, describes the work of the New York Performance Standards Consortium (NYPSC), a group of 36 high schools in New York City, Rochester, and Ithaca. The Consortium describes their work on performance-based assessments (like those advocated by Meier and Knoester) as better than high-stakes testing, placing attention on assessing skills that can help challenged communities grow (e.g., critical thinking, problem solving, and public speaking), and providing additional resources to help students, schools, and parents move away from test-focused schooling. They successfully document the results of schools that have implemented such performance-based assessments.

The content of the book is comprehensive but relies heavily on anecdotes and personal accounts of how these assessments have been used to evaluate student learning in specific, local contexts that are willing to be adaptable. Meier and Knoester urge readers to focus on local decision-making and what is best for their schools. The approach for the promoted assessments is student-centered, and encourages what many consider to be 21st-century skills. Moreover, the assessments recommended by Meier and Knoester allow for multiple demonstrations of knowledge acquisition and mobilization by students.

Guidance for Policy and Practice

For readers seeking answers, perhaps the most influential aspect of the book will be the varied experiences that Meier and Knoester bring to their recommendations. The book primarily relies on the clinical and practitioner expertise gained by decades of working in schools to create authentic assessments of student learning. Readers will be able to see how the reforms have been implemented and gain insight from the experience of early adopters. Policy makers and school leaders will benefit from the authors’ stories, as each anecdote offers an intriguing summary of how a given practice can enhance learning and provide information to communities. Because it is not aimed at a research audience, teachers and school leaders will enjoy the conversational

writing style. It is relatively jargon-free and offers clear guidance for those seeking to improve the type of assessments currently employed in their classrooms.

Still, while the suggestions provided in the book seek to offer a roadmap for policy makers and school leaders, the recommendations are, again, based more on anecdote than on research evidence. Because local and state policy makers are required by state and the federal governments to implement evidence-based approaches, the recommendations will likely require more careful study and research before they can be funded or implemented.

Another limitation of the book is the reliance on local control and decision-making, where school-level changes can be made with parents to best assess students. Under ESSA, local districts and states currently have flexibility to utilize performance assessments and other measures of student learning—but advocates for test-based accountability and civil rights groups will likely push back against reducing emphasis on tests (Ehrenfreund, 2015). Still, Meier and Knoester provide examples of how these alternative assessments can be utilized.

The evidence base of the assessments discussed in *Beyond Testing* needs to be expanded upon more thoroughly in order to be more useful to local and state leaders. Many of the prior works cited by the authors are from previous books they authored, and there is a reliance on progressive texts for exemplars. Although the authors are careful to note that the book was not designed to be a literature review of experimental successes of alternative assessments, the stories of these alternative assessments offer hope to those seeking substitutes for the test-driven accountability that has dominated school reform in recent decades, and a more useful approach for decision makers would have been to address and cite the extant research behind each of these recommendations—even if such research is limited.

The most valuable section and perhaps the best developed part of the book is Chapter 10. In this chapter, Cook and Tashlik persuasively describe how to enact performance assessments across a network of schools to improve student learning. Cook and Tashlik clarify an implementation process for local leaders hoping to advance performance assessments in multiple contexts. At the core of the NYPSC's performance assessments is a belief in and advocacy for using multiple measures to demonstrate learning. Moreover, Chapter 10 offers a results and outcomes section—one that outlines how the assessments, inquiry discussions, and high expectations within the Consortium affect graduation and college readiness for students from the network.

If one lesson can be taken from this book, it is that using only one measure for accountability (e.g., standardized tests) offers a far too narrow glimpse of what student learning looks like. According to Fair Test (2015), ESSA has created an opportunity for states and districts to reevaluate accountability programs and promote better assessments of student learning. The book is potentially helpful for policy guidance, because identification of local needs is part of the evidence generation cycle advanced under ESSA. This text offers an excellent starting point for local decision makers to share their needs and desires regarding the use of alternative assessments and provides fodder for further development and study. The book also has potential for developing a dynamic logic model where stakeholders can begin data collection and evaluation of the alternatives described in the book.

Standardization and Accountability

Standardization and accountability writ large are two deep-rooted topics that continue to filter into the politics of education in the U.S. In particular, the issue of high-stakes testing has been central to education debates for decades and has been intensified by federal actions under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2002), Race to the Top (2009), and the Obama-era federal education waiver process (Slack, 2012). As mentioned, ESSA has provided new opportunities for states and local communities to evaluate their accountability policies and expand the use of multiple, varied indicators of student and school success (Woods & Scott, 2017). Meier and Knoester's work comes at an important time in education policymaking, as states and districts will continue to seek and implement alternative measures of school quality or student success beyond testing.

Advocates for test-based accountability demand assessments of student learning to hold schools and teachers accountable and to ensure that historically neglected subpopulations (often determined by race, economic disadvantage, English language learner status, etc.) receive a quality education. Alternatively, opponents like Meier and Knoester express concerns that high-stakes testing narrows the curriculum, limits the amount of information available to parents about the quality of the education provided, and creates undue, corruptible pressures on school employees. The pressures of high-stakes testing as a result of NCLB were first described by Nichols & Berliner (2007), who warned that these pressures—like those included within the NCLB legislation—distorted the integrity of schools and undermined the broader, historical purposes of public education in the U.S.

Conclusions

School and district leaders looking for alternatives or seeking to add depth to their assessments will benefit from the conversations generated by this book. Schools and districts may not be able to completely abandon the testing requirements of federal and state laws, but this book provides a glimpse into what schools could do by implementing varied assessments of their students' knowledge and providing feedback for the development and encouragement of student voices in assessment policymaking. According to the authors, standardized tests are but one of many metrics that can be used to assess schools and students. *Beyond Testing* will offer a point of departure for individuals who are interested in provoking deep discussions about student learning. Policy makers and their advisors would benefit from this text because it pushes the conversation of testing beyond what can be measured easily towards creating the type of information that can be gathered to inform and improve education in local settings. The authors conclude, "Assessments of schools and children should always be tied to this deeper purpose of education—the training ground of democracy" (p. 128). At the core of their philosophy of education is the idea that education provides the foundation for an informed citizenry—one that can participate in democratic and collective action. The purpose of the book is to promote assessments that provide information to communities and parents so they can make better decisions.

Meier and Knoester have succeeded in pushing the conversation of testing toward a conversation about what kind of assessments truly expand our knowledge of what students are learning in schools. If an individual is looking for a detailed account of alternatives to standardized tests,

Beyond Testing will provide ample information that can be used to make suggestions to school administrators and other local decision makers for broadening the types of measures teachers can use to assess student learning.

Author Notes

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