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from the  
TEACHERS' LOUNGE

## STANDARDIZED TESTS: BANE OR BOON?

Lois Kregel

They will soon be upon us again, those standardized achievement tests. Just when the school year is well under way, just when the classes have settled into their new routines, just when teachers have learned about the diverse personalities of the students they are teaching, all must be interrupted for those Iowa Basics. You hear questions raised: "Is it worth it? Why must we do this if we never use them?" Sometimes you merely see looks of resignation. It is safe to say that few teachers enjoy administering

achievement tests.

Why, then, have we continued this practice, year after year? Is there value in it for our schools?

What are standardized tests? They are tests constructed by specialists in test construction, with the help of curriculum experts, teachers, and school administrators, for the purpose of determining a student's level of performance, relative to that of other students of similar age and grade. They are normed on a representative sample of students nationwide. Students are tested in math, science, language arts, and general knowledge. There are several kinds of standardized tests; we are concerned here with two of them: achievement tests.

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which measure *past* performance, and ability tests (sometimes called aptitude or intelligence tests), which predict *future* performance. At Adams we use the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills for grades three through eight, together with the Cognitive Abilities Test in grades 4, 6, and 8; these tests were normed on the same group of students. For grades kindergarten through three, we use the Metropolitan Achievement Test. There are several other good tests, such as the California Achievement Test and the Stanford Achievement Test.

Objections to standardized testing come from parents as well as teachers. The chief objection seems to be that it takes away much-needed teaching time. Iowa Basics are supposed to take from two to four hours. However, that does not include teacher preparation time, which is necessary so that the tests can be given exactly according to instructions; nor does it include explaining the tests to the students and putting them in the proper frame of mind to take them. When students are absent, time must be set aside for them to make up what they missed. Moreover, when you try to find an uninterrupted block of time for a test, frequently there is not enough time left to teach a whole lesson, and daily work suffers. No doubt, more than two to

four hours is required.

Some teachers object that they have no use for the test results. After all the time they spend, the tests are scored and filed, and never looked at again.

Some critics claim that the tests are not an accurate reflection of a student's achievement. Items which he has never been taught often appear, making him tense and affecting his score. Other factors, physical, psychological — even the weather — affect it, too.

Others object that the annual cost of about a dollar per student is not justified, since not enough people benefit from it.

Are these objections valid? Is there sufficient merit in standardized testing to counterbalance the criticism leveled against it?

Achievement testing does, indeed, serve a good purpose: it is useful to the teacher in the classroom; it is useful to the administrator and education committee in the school. To be sure, it is not a perfect tool; there may be flaws in test items, stress, illness, or fatigue on the part of students, imperfect test givers; but achievement tests remain the best objective yardstick we have to see how we compare to schools nationwide, as well as to other Christian schools.

How do tests help the teacher? They yield information about the class as a whole, as well as about

individual students. Suppose that many score low on a given test; a teacher will look for reasons, and for ways to strengthen that area. If test items deal with material that has not been taught, that teacher may consider whether or not the instruction needs to be revamped a bit; on the other hand, he may find the material inappropriate, even though it is taught in the nation's schools. If only one or two students score low, that might be a signal for extra help; or, it could call for an examination of their Cognitive Abilities tests, to see whether there is a discrepancy between performance and expectation. By making good use of test results, a teacher can find the strengths and weaknesses in his class and teach to them. It is true that a good teacher is sensitive to the class, and knows whether or not it is doing well; but *how* well, *how* poorly in comparison to others of the same age and grade, can be determined only by objective measurement.

The administrator, too, when he examines the test results, can obtain a profile of each class. He may spot trouble areas that surface consistently throughout the whole school; his attention may be drawn to a problem in one class or another. He can judge whether, in general, the school is well above the national average, as it should be, in math,

in language arts, in science.

And then what? No matter how much useful information one can glean from a test, it does no good if you relegate it to a file to gather dust. It is up to the teacher to make use of the results, and up to the administrator to call a meeting of the teachers, in order to evaluate those results as a staff. Records of previous years can be compared. Has a given class always been "bright" or "slow"? Are there gaps in the curriculum? Are the textbooks adequate? Ideas for teaching can be discussed, suggestions given and received, valuable insights shared. What a gold mine testing can be, if we make the most of it!

We should take the time for that, should we not? Who has a better reason to strive for excellence? Motivated by our belief in God's Covenant, we are teaching children, who will teach *their* children the truth of God's word and the wonders of His creation in the light of it. That truth is under attack today, more than ever. Our children will have to grow up to be discerning readers and thinkers, as covenant parents, as teachers and preachers, as office-bearers, society members, and wherever the Lord calls them to witness. For that they need the best possible education.

Testing is worth the time and effort: it keeps us on our academic toes! ■■■