

## **QEM Panel Discussion: February 21, 2004**

### ***No Child Left Behind: An International Perspective***

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The term “high-stakes tests” is applied both to the use of student test scores to assess teacher performance and to their use in determining students’ promotion and graduation. In the United States, some states use the tests for both purposes, while others use them only as a measure of teacher performance. *No Child Left Behind* requires only that tests be used for the latter purpose. It is interesting to compare testing trends in the United States with those in other countries. For example, of the 16 countries included in a book I edited on international education policy, most did not use tests to assess teachers’ performance. Of those that did, no country has gone as far as the United States. These are examples:

- England: national curriculum/league tables based on tests administered at 11 years old, designed in part to give parents information to use in choosing among schools.
- Australia: benchmarks and tests; concern about fragmentation of instruction and missing the “real” problems.
- New Zealand: increased emphasis on accountability, but no nationwide use of standardized tests until the 11<sup>th</sup> year.
- Chile: vouchers/tests/league tables to facilitate comparisons in connection with a voucher system; tests not assigned great importance by teachers, although bonuses are given to schools (to be divided equally among the teachers) for “high” performance, defined in part (about one-third) by test scores, with the remainder using a range of other measures.
- Singapore: league tables of secondary schools and junior colleges based on test scores/cash awards to the 40 secondary schools that are most highly ranked.

While most countries represented in the book do not hold schools accountable for test scores, almost every country uses scores (typically in the form of national tests) at some point during students’ schooling to assess their performance. Examples:

- Singapore: strong emphasis on early and continuing “streaming” and testing, in part tied to economic plans and an attempt to make the most efficient use of human resources in meeting national economic goals.
- Japan: no national tests until secondary school, when schools are highly stratified by student achievement; declining population apparently easing university entrance examination pressures, but not for the most prestigious schools/link to hiring practices, which strongly favor prestigious schools for jobs in government and industry.
- China: revisions in the university entrance examination to encourage more innovative classroom practices; some concerns among teachers, parents and

students that those students in less affluent schools, which might not have access to innovative teaching methods, will be at a disadvantage.

- Turkey: increasing youth population combined with higher expectations to attend university resulting in enormous “exam anxiety.” Standardized tests generally not given before secondary school, but then heavy reliance on them to enter prestigious secondary schools and universities; as in all countries, even earlier curricula influenced by the high-stakes testing, even though the testing doesn’t begin until secondary school.
- France: sample-based pupil assessments only until *baccalaureat* (at end of secondary school), which gives the right to go to university; 62% of the age group has the *baccalaureat*, although not all students who have the *baccalaureat* actually attend university. Schools that train the French elite considered superior (except for law and medicine, which they do not offer), with most national politicians and senior civil servants studying at a single higher education institution: the Ecole Nationale d’Administration (ENA). (*Baccalaureat* results published for upper secondary schools.)
- Germany: tracking into three separate schools at fifth grade, but not based on standardized tests. The school-leaving certificate after grade 13, called the *Abitur* (includes an examination), provides access to universities.
- South Africa: high school leaving examination; third grade assessment on a sample basis.
- Sweden: national examinations at the end of 9<sup>th</sup> grade; individual programs for students who do not pass the exam.
- Israel: university entrance examinations, student assessments.
- Russia: examinations given by individual universities, with families paying fees for faculty tutoring; rural students have little chance to enter prestigious universities; recent attempts to implement a national examination system.
- Canada: Quite different from the United States: standardized tests not used to determine students’ promotion and graduation, teachers not held accountable for test results, and SATs not required by most universities (except for U.S. students!).