

June 25, 2000

**Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) 30th Annual National Conference on Large-Scale
Assessment
Snowbird, Utah
Keynote Address/Opening Session**

The Meaning and Realities of Assessment: An Urban Superintendent's Perspective*

**by Pascal D. Forgione, Jr., Ph. D.
Superintendent of Schools
Austin Independent School District
1111 West 6th Street Austin, TX 78703-5300
Telephone: 512-414-2482 Fax: 512-414-1486**

***This paper is a joint effort with Dr. Joy McLarty,
Deputy Superintendent for Accountability and Information Systems at Austin ISD.**

June 25, 2000

Good afternoon, friends. Thank you for inviting me to speak to you today.

It's a pleasure to get this chance to talk to you, old friends and new allies, about assessment. I've spent large parts of my career in education on assessment--working on assessment instruments, analyzing results, crunching numbers on an international scale. I'll probably see a number of you in Purgatory for the time we've spent building testing instruments that would help schools, teachers and students.

But a funny thing happened to me on the way to this conference. Last August, I became superintendent of a large urban school district. So the talk I'm giving today is far different from the talk I would have given one year ago. I've learned a great deal about assessment, including how much I didn't know.

I have chosen to focus the assigned topic of my presentation "Trends in Large-Scale Assessment" on the meaning and realities of large-scale assessment from an urban school Superintendent's perspective. So you can breathe easier, this will not be a chronology of the great discos and dance halls where many of you assisted me in pilot-testing Connecticut's and Delaware's emerging performance assessment prompts and tasks. For the record the address that appears in the "Roster of Participants" is not correct. I am no longer a "federale" (oh, excuse my colloquial expression), but since last August, believe-it-or-not, I have taken on "honest work" in the educational vineyard (yes, that is where the rubber really hits the road and typically splashes all over the Superintendent). I am currently the Superintendent of Schools of the third largest school district in Texas; I am the seventh Superintendent in the past ten years!

My presentation is structured in three parts, in the tradition of great Italian or Latin orators, AKA Julius Caesar!

First, I will overview a set of new appreciations that I have gained about assessment (outside of student testing) over the past year;

Second, I will examine a few current assessment issues impacting on a large urban school district; and

Third, I will offer some thoughts on the future of assessment from an urban school district perspective.

Part I: New Assessment Realities

Let me now set a context so you can appreciate the new realities of assessment that I have gained over the past ten (10) months as Superintendent of Schools.

When I arrived in Austin last summer, I was ready. I knew about the Texas TAAS test. I knew about the Austin ISD performance on the test. I even knew about the district's having been indicted by the County Attorney for its unacceptable data reporting and practices.

What I didn't know was all the other kinds of large-scale assessments I would be required to make in the months ahead. By the way, can anybody here spell "Stachybotrus?"

For those of you who don't know Austin, it is a beautiful city and a vibrant community. The Austin Independent School District is an urban school district with about 78,000 students served by 103 schools. Like other urban school districts, we essentially operate our own city, complete with our own telephone and fiber optic cable systems, police department, transportation system, facilities management and food services. People in Austin still believe in public schools and expect a quality education as they typically had received in the past. Like other urban systems, we serve many minority students – 2 in 3 of our students are persons of color; about 46% of our students are Hispanic and 17% African American. About half of our students are considered at-risk. While we are located in the center of a booming economy, more than half our students come from low-income homes, and the economic boom has become somewhat of a mixed blessing, which I will discuss a little later. We struggle with budget shortages, aging facilities, and political issues as we seek to keep our focus on the central mission, teaching and learning. In my first year at AISD, I've not only been assessing student learning, but I've also had to spend a large amount of time assessing *Stachybotrus*, asbestos, the effects of the real estate market on school finance, and counter-productive personnel management systems. Welcome to the life of an urban school superintendent.

Stachybotrus, for those of you who are wondering, is a particularly nasty mold. It grows in the dark where it can get nutrients (the cellulose in wallboard will do nicely) and moisture. It finds a good home in wet areas behind walls, under floors, and above the ceiling. In sufficient concentration, it can be deadly to people. In smaller concentrations, the impact is more like an allergy, differentially affecting individual teachers and children. Earlier this year, I was forced to evacuate immediately a school in which we found *Stachybotrus* and *Penicillium* molds, and to relocate 750 elementary students to four other schools for the remainder of the year. We had to make that decision in the space of two hours. We now know that it will require several million dollars and one year to get the mold out.

Asbestos presented us additional assessment opportunities. Studies of our schools had previously revealed areas of floor and wall tiles that contained asbestos, and these were addressed. But no one had looked at the ceilings. Until this year! We had conducted stratified sampling of the various patterns of tiles in the ceilings of our schools sufficient to determine which manufacturers had provided tiles containing asbestos. But that wasn't the primary assessment problem. As you may know, asbestos is harmless until it becomes airborne (friable). At that point, the fibers may be breathed in, lodge in the lung, and become hazardous to health. Once again we had to move students to asbestos-free rooms – fortunately this time they could stay in their school. This summer we are correcting the problems. Again at the cost of greater than a million dollars.

I knew coming in that the Austin school district would probably become what the state identified as a property-wealthy, or Chapter 41, district within the year. This meant that, instead of receiving money from the state, we would be giving it back. Chapter 41 is also referred to as the Robin Hood program where a district is capped in its level of expenditures and all additional revenue generated is captured by the state. What I didn't know, and found myself having to assess, was the impact of the rapidly escalating property values in the school district and their compounded effect on state funding. Austin is the only major urban district in Texas so classified. Despite our high proportion of economically disadvantaged students, and the compounded incidence of poor children, special education students, at-risk students, and English as a second language learners, we are now in the same class as many exclusive Texas suburban districts. My staff and I have spent hundreds of hours this spring reworking the budget to keep what is essential and yet remain fiscally responsible. We're trying to avoid increasing the tax rate for our community and still pay our teachers a competitive wage and promise them stability of employment for the future.

We almost had it licked once. Then a few months after we began these deliberations, we discovered that, not only would we have to give some \$30 million back to the state under Chapter 41 status, but we would lose another \$20 million in hold-harmless money that the state provided to cover teacher salary increases and the homestead exemptions. So we tried to re-work our previous budget projections. In the middle of that work, the County Tax Assessor suddenly says that the 8 percent property value increase he had previously projected would now be closer to 16 percent. This means a slight reprieve this year with additional revenue to be received, but a harsher

sentence in terms of money we owe the state in subsequent years (i.e., from \$35 million in FY 01 to \$93 million, \$129 million, and \$169 million in out years). So we again went back to the drawing boards.

Talk about assessment. You should see the pages and pages of financial calculations required to come up with a school district's financial relationship with the state in Texas.

You may have seen the prediction by one of Governor Romer's colleagues that being School Superintendent in Los Angeles will be infinitely harder than his job as governor of Colorado. She may be right. I can tell you honestly that I have faced more, and more serious, problems in my ten months with the Austin School District than I did in over my 4 _ year my tenure as State Superintendent in Delaware. And, I have learned something about assessment from each of them.

Let me review my growth curve on three of these areas.

First, from *Stachybotrus*, I learned the importance of diversity. We had to assess the presence of the mold and it's impact on the people, some of whom were highly sensitive to it. In this case, the issue was how to ascertain and respond to the diverse reactions to the mold. The extreme sensitivity of some students and teachers alerted us to potential problems for all the school's population. While the effects varied by person, decisions had to be made for the group (that is, the health and safety of the entire school).

Our testing programs are often pressed by the needs of our special students, those with disabilities, who speak other languages, or who are otherwise diverse. We sometimes fret about meeting their needs, but as our experience with *Stachybotrus* has taught me, we are best off taking their situations very seriously – they may be the vanguard of what is to come for all.

Second, asbestos fibers don't only occur as part of school floors, wallboards and, as we have learned, ceiling tiles. They also occur in the world around us. In fact every time a truck puts on its breaks, it releases fibers into the air. From our brush with asbestos, I've learned a great deal about setting standards. How much asbestos in the air should be sufficient to require closing a school? Some parents argue that a single fiber is too much since even one could cause damage. However students may be safer from asbestos in school than walking to school from home. Where is the line on this slippery (and very expensive) slope? And do we need to separately measure and set standards for each room (a conjunctive model), or is it sufficient that the exposure throughout the school remain below some average (a compensatory model). The implications for how many schools fail our health and safety testing are essentially the same as the implications of these models for how many students fail our multi-part assessments.

And third, the school funding formula challenge has reminded me that we are assessing a continually moving target. Attempts to reduce complex calculations based on student demographics, property wealth, and special needs to a dollar amount to be paid or received in any given year leaves little room for understanding or responding to the complex social organism that a school district is.

Thus, my year in Austin has continued to challenge me and my colleagues on new and different situations where assessment methods and standards have had to be used to guide important decisions related to the management of a complex urban school district.

Part II: Current Assessment Issues

Now, let's shift our focus to an examination of a few current assessment issues that are directly impacting on m urban school clients and district.

Some of you recall Austin's assessment expertise and capacity in an earlier era when it was one of the finest in the nation. I am sorry to report that this is no longer the case, and that is also something I have learned from my superintendency. Today, the main job of our assessment staff is schlepping test materials from the state's testing vendor to the schools and back again, and filling out the paperwork that says we did that properly.

I believe that the demise of district-level testing functions is not unique to Austin. As states take over assessment, requiring and building massive criterion-referenced testing programs matched to the state-mandated curriculum,

and as budget shortages impact schools, it is a natural response to cut the district assessment function. This has many undesirable impacts:

1. It restricts district assessment, and potentially the curriculum as well, to what the state chooses to test.
2. It leaves many educators believing that their primary function, especially in the elementary grades, is to prepare students for criterion-referenced tests.
3. It eliminates a primary source of the creation for new assessment approaches. Diverse approaches are being stamped out of assessment at the local level.
4. It removes positions that could further school-based research and testing practices.
5. It leaves the state without qualified district staff to call on to assist and guide its development of state-level assessments.

Under the present circumstances, it will be exceptionally challenging to rebuild the assessment function at AISD. The state tests appear to increasingly be seen as gatekeepers that will prevent the promotion of individual students. In order to adequately prepare our students, AISD will be administering practice tests to all of our students. That means that this fall our district office will be processing about 58,000 additional tests, about 6,000 of them primary booklets. With a staff of three, this leaves little time for other more cerebral activities.

Let me be clear that I believe that the state testing program in Texas has had tremendous positive benefit for our students. The disaggregated reporting has forced us to look carefully at how we are serving our students, and at how well we are focusing our instructional efforts. That is not my issue here. Rather, I am concerned about unintended consequences of the state's efforts, and about the apparent trend to increase state-supplied and mandated testing still further, diverting resources from other worthwhile endeavors.

One consequence of the Texas' state criterion-referenced testing efforts became clear to me as we implemented a selection process for a new norm-referenced test. A number of our educators saw no reason to include norms at all, despite the fact that our state program does not provide any national normative data at all. Maybe that's a Texas thing.

Beyond that, however, we found that we were looking quite differently at what we wanted in the norm-referenced program. No longer was a tight match to our curriculum the primary consideration. Because we already have a testing program that is a better match than any national test could possibly be, a loose match was actually preferable – we didn't want anything that would be irrelevant to the program, of course, but we also wanted to have a test that would reflect a "national" standards of performance rather than the Texas standards for which we were already testing. We were also looking for an instrument that would have more ceiling than the state test since its criterion-referenced base does not provide good assessment for our higher scoring students. We need information for identifying gifted and talented young people, as well as for gauging the adequacy with which we are serving them.

As we looked for a norm-referenced test, I became aware of another trend in testing that may or may not be related to the increase in state developed programs. There are fewer tests to choose from. Given the need to have (again by state mandate) norms no more than six years old, and hoping for a reasonable shelf life, we found only four testing programs to consider where previously there would probably have been twice that. Several well-known programs were too old to be considered as a new adoption, and others had been merged into other programs, or simply discontinued. The only new program in the grades we were considering--grades 3, 5 and 8--was the ACT EXPLORE, and that was available only for grade 8.

One other factor we always have to consider is that we are a dual-language district. A large proportion of our students speak Spanish. We have a large bilingual education program in our schools. Many of our functions, most critically those involving parents, are conducted in both languages. We did not find a strong selection of assessments available in Spanish. The state is beginning to provide them as part of their mandated program, and some of the testing publishers are as well. We anticipate needing to have everything now available in English available in alternative languages, and especially in Spanish.

Part III: The Future of Assessment

Let me now offer some thoughts on the future of assessment. We agree-- don't we?--that there is no way that reading and mathematics tests can be equivalent. These are different subject areas, and equivalence doesn't have any meaning for different subject areas. Right? But we certainly have found approaches to establish useful ways of thinking about scores as if the tests were equivalent. We give the different tests to the same group of students and then look at the placement of the student's score in the common norm group. The result is called a percentile and we use it to say, "You are performing as well in reading as in math. Your reading and math scores are equivalent."

Now think about the issue with different languages. Can tests be psychometrically equivalent when one is in English and the other in Spanish? Well, not in the same way we are used to thinking about equivalence, but perhaps we could find ways to establish comparability that would be useful to us. Could we use a common norming group? Only if they were fully bilingual, and that is difficult to do. But are there other ways to allow us to have knowledge of a student's performance regardless of his or her language? What if we were to print every item in multiple languages routinely for all of our students? Could we use common methodology to set standards for both languages and then compare scores according to whether these standards had been met? We need to think outside the box here.

We also need some new thinking in our choice of skills to test. Austin ISD is working with the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh to improve teaching and learning. We see that the Texas curriculum, the TEKS, focuses on what students know and can do. That isn't enough for the future. We need students to have the abilities needed to learn and the disposition to exert effort and be persistent in their learning.

Certainly we remain interested in how well a child can write an essay, but we are even more interested in whether the child understands why writing is important and what criteria should be used to judge its quality. We need assessments that can reflect whether a student understands what questions to ask to gain relevant information, or how to determine the importance or veracity of information as it relates to a problem or potential solution. We also need to know to what extent these students are prepared to exert effort to learn, to remain persistent, and to overcome obstacles in their learning process. These assessments of the future will need to focus on the learning skills and dispositions themselves, rather than just on the content of what is learned, because it is more and more difficult for us to anticipate the content that students will need to know. Thus, a number of questions remain to be addressed, including: how will we develop these assessments? What shape will they take?

Computerized assessments are also in our future, but probably not immediately on any large scale and probably not as test scorers or page turners. Computers currently are simply too expensive, too difficult to keep current, and too easy to break or steal for us to choose them for tasks that can be easily and inexpensively accomplished in other ways. This is not to say that we wouldn't like to use computers for administering and immediately scoring tests; only that it is not cost-effective for us to do so. We expect to use them where they save us money. For example, we could use them to handle on-demand testing with small numbers of students where they save having an individual monitor. We also expect to use them where the nature of the test demands their simulation capabilities, or where computer skills themselves are being assessed. The rule of thumb for us is that we must be as cost-effective as we can in all of our functions, and computers will be put to the same test as any other piece of equipment that we and our students use.

Conclusion

Just as the world of education has been in flux for several decades now, the world of education assessment has also been in flux. If we are going to stabilize both of these worlds, we have to take a long-range view of education and its assessment. This means we must somehow find ways to embrace and assess the complexity of teaching and learning.

Reducing this complexity to a limited set of numbers has value. It provides a basic roadmap for the major thoroughfares into town. But we can't stop there. We have to know our way around the back alleys and cul-de-sacs and small neighborhood streets of our educational systems. We have to find our way down the hallways and into the classrooms of our schools. We have to be able to avoid the Stachybotrus and seal off the asbestos and keep going. We have to be able to calculate how to most effectively match our resources to our needs. We have to be able to walk into every classroom and understand the depth of learning taking place. It's a daunting challenge, but a challenge that is at the heart of all our work.

Thus, the signature of this conference has been to bring the science of assessment and the practical needs of public education together. Today in the year 2000 this is as important a public education policy priority as it was some 20 years ago when I attended my first large-scale assessment conference. We must continue to commit ourselves to fostering meaningful dialogue in the service of quality education for all of America's children, our most precious natural resource.

Thank you.

Pascal D. Forgione, Superintendent
Austin Independent School District
1111 West 6th Street
Austin, Texas 78703-5300
Office: 512-414-2482
Fax: 512-414-1486
superintendent@austin.isd.tenet.edu