

Editorial

"STAR Scores May Be Meaningless, But They Can Only Go Up"

By

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ON MONDAY, the California Department of Education will release the results of the third annual Stanford 9 /STAR series of tests of second- through 11th-grade public school students. These test results tell us virtually nothing about how our children are doing in school.

The Department of Education violated rule No. 1 of meaningful test giving: Make sure the test is secure and that test-takers don't know the questions in advance. Every question on this year's Stanford 9 test has been repeated from the previous two years. Old copies of the test are easily available, having passed through the hands of about 250,000 teachers.

Some school districts have purchased versions of the Stanford 9 test used in other states –which are virtually identical to California's– and use them as "practice" tests, allowing the students to see the questions and discuss with their teacher the correct answers in advance of the "real" test. Further, the Stanford 9 is an off-the-shelf "nationally normed" test, and no one claims that it is in alignment with California's official curriculum.

The STAR "augmentation" of the Stanford 9 is intended to be more aligned with California's curriculum –but that alignment is far from perfect, and much of the material on the STAR test has nothing to do with what is supposed to be taught in our classrooms. And while, for the first time, 25 percent of the questions on the STAR test are new ones rotated into the test, that means that three-quarters of the STAR questions are recycled ones available to anyone who asks around for old copies of the test.

The full results of the Stanford 9/STAR test have been delayed yet again this year. We're supposed to know how individual schools are doing compared with other schools whose student bodies are composed of children from families of the same socioeconomic status –the "similar schools" rankings.

This year, however, two-thirds of all districts turned in test papers without the demographic data properly completed. Thus, we'll know the raw scores in mid-July, but we won't know the similar-schools rankings until September. When they do come out, they won't be any more meaningful than the raw scores. Not only will cheating affect the scores, but in some districts, the demographic data are filled in by young children, making the whole exercise a joke.

Further, the Department of Education's claims about the numbers of eligible students taking the test are phony: They are based on the claims of individual districts, which are not audited. For example, the Contra Costa Times last year discovered that while Contra Costa County school districts claimed a 95 percent participation by eligible students, the real participation level in that county was 85 percent.

The Stanford 9/STAR test is exactly what one would expect from a public education establishment that wanted test scores to go up every year, regardless of true student achievement levels. It is an embarrassment to the people of California and an indictment of a public school monopoly that will do anything to avoid accountability for its failure to educate our children.