



TESTS that TEACH

Using Standardized Tests
to Improve Instruction

Karen Tankersley

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*This book is dedicated to
Emily and Mandi.*

*May your lives be filled
with health,
wealth, and happiness.*

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Introduction

Over the past decade, many school districts have begun to use data to analyze the academic performance of the students they serve. Schools have used data on student performance to examine how well they compare to other schools as well as to track how students are performing over time. Administrators and teachers have used data to make critical decisions about what to do and when to do it.

Effective schools use a recursive cycle of assessment and critical analysis to examine the mountains of student performance data generated year after year. They regularly collect data about their students, examine school programs and practices, scrutinize and make meaning from the data, and even establish action plans to address concerns or problems arising from their study of the data. While this beneficial process has provided a strong foundation for focused school improvement efforts and should definitely be continued, school improvement efforts cannot stop here. Schools must also examine what happens in the classroom. The missing step that reflective schools must take is to carefully analyze state standards and to look at the way tasks and questions are structured and presented on state assessments. Just as it makes a difference what content students are asked about on state tests, it makes a difference how questions are asked and what tasks students are expected to perform. For most districts, this performance gap occurs on the constructed-response sections of their state assessments. When cognitive expectations of the classroom do not match assessment measures, a disconnect occurs between instruction and

assessment performance. If teachers do not regularly ask students to synthesize their learning and apply their knowledge and skills in more sophisticated and unique ways, how can we expect students to suddenly be able to do so at assessment time? Even though schools are continually making efforts to enhance student performance, if daily instruction does not prepare students to easily respond to the constructed-response questions, students will continue to stumble on these sections of the test. What goes on in the classroom on a daily basis matters and matters greatly.

Although many state and national assessments contain multiple-choice test items, most states have also incorporated some “open-ended” or constructed-response test items into their own tests. Those that do not have them already designed into their testing instruments are currently planning revisions, so it is likely that all states will soon incorporate constructed-response items into their student performance assessments. Under the threat of losing federal funds, states are expanding not only the content areas tested but also the number of grade levels to be tested. Student accountability has also been increased in many states. As of the 2005–06 school year, at least 22 states have developed and are implementing a graduation test as a requirement for receiving a high school graduation diploma. Clearly, constructed-response items will not be going away any time soon, so teachers must learn how to design lessons that enable students to perform well on these types of assessments.

This disconnect between what students are expected to do on assessments and actual classroom instruction can be seen not only on state assessments but also on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) test, which tracks national student performance in key content areas. When we examine national data, we can see that on the constructed-response items, student performance lags behind more traditional performance measures. At least half of the items contained on the NAEP test administered to a sampling of students across the nation are constructed-response items, which expect students to make inferences, explain, organize, analyze, and apply learning in much deeper ways. For these reasons, it is essential that teachers

know how to use instructional practices that solidly prepare students to meet the demands that state tests will require of them.

The testing requirements and accountability measures facing schools and teachers today have been contested by various educational groups in the United States. Nevertheless, accountability pressures are not likely to be eased any time soon, so to debate whether students should or should not be tested is not a good use of our time. The fact remains that as long as testing remains a part of the way schools and teachers are measured, educators must know and understand the “rules” by which score is kept. For this reason, it is imperative that teachers learn to use instructional techniques that raise student expectations and learning to more intense levels of thinking and independence than ever before.

This book will help you develop the skills and understanding to teach beyond the rote facts and memorization stage and help your students truly apply the skills they are learning as independent and deep thinkers. You will be able to challenge and stretch young minds in more effective ways and ensure that assessment truly measures daily instruction. You will learn how to build a supportive, collaborative school environment where the entire staff works to clarify expectations and set consistent, achievable performance measures. By implementing strategies that allow students to build their skills, learn self-assessment, and provide a supportive and meaningful environment, you will be able to better prepare your students not only to score well on state and national assessments but to take their place as thoughtful and organized thinkers in a rapidly changing, competitive society.