

Opinion: Annual testing a good assessment of student achievement

By Vicki Barber

I recently watched a rerun of "Little House on the Prairie." All the children were in a one-room schoolhouse that I remember my grandmother talking about when she was a child. In those days, you took a test at the end of the year, left school for the summer, and came back the next September to take up where you left off unless you stayed on the farm to help.

Things are a bit different now, or maybe not so much. We all know that at the end of every year kids take a series of tests. In California, we call them STAR (Standardized Testing and Reporting Program) tests. The tests are usually given in April or May to ensure that much of the teaching and learning has already been completed before testing.

In August, school districts receive their assessment data from the year before and, of course, the first question is how did the kids do? Did they learn anything last year? Did they get what was taught? Educators use the assessment data to give teachers an idea about how much of the previous year's curriculum children learned. Teachers also use this data to make determinations as to where exactly to begin the current year's instruction.



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No, the tests don't cover everything. A young child might have learned that dogs have large teeth, bark loudly, and protect you when the police officer came to school with his canine companion. A question about a dog may not show up on the test but a question like $2 + 2 = \underline{\quad}$ would. Both items are important, but only one will be tested. Both items will be stored in a child's brain for future reference.

The STAR tests are mainly concerned with how much core academic learning a child has acquired. The results from each child are combined with those of the rest of the school, the district, and the state, to give the public an idea of how much core academic learning is taking place. A major goal at the national level is for every child to be at or above proficiency in English-Language Arts/ELA (reading, writing, and oral language) and Mathematics for his or her grade level by the year 2014.

So how'd we do this year? In 2010, in California, 52 percent of the 2-11 grade students who took the tests scored at or above proficiency in ELA. That's a significant improvement from the 35 percent proficiency rate of the students who took those tests in 2003.

Math is a bit harder to analyze because of all of the types of math available in high school, but in grades 2-7, 48 percent of California's students scored at or above proficient in math this year, while we were only at 35 percent able to do proficient or above math work in 2003.

Science end of the year tests are up from 29 percent in at or above proficiency in 2003 to 40 percent proficient or above at this point in time. History-Social Science has risen from 29 percent in 2003 at or above proficiency to 44 percent in 2010.

We are pleased to note that El Dorado County students continue to show improvement in all core curriculum areas and consistently score higher than the state in these areas as well. In 2010, 66.3 percent of El Dorado County students scored at or above the proficient level in English-language arts. In mathematics, 60.9 percent of El Dorado County students scored at or above the proficient level, while in history-social science 57 percent and in science 69.2 percent of El Dorado County students scored at or above the proficient level.

When looking at test data, it is also important to consider the results of the California High School Exit Exam which high school students are required to pass prior to receiving their high school diploma. Once again, El Dorado County students are scoring extremely well. In 2010, 83 percent of our students passed the English-language arts portion of the test as compared to 64% of students statewide. In mathematics, 80 percent of our students passed the CAHSEE as compared to 63 percent of students statewide. Please keep in mind that this data represents the percentage of students who pass this exam in their 10th-grade year. Those who do not pass at this point will have additional opportunities to take and pass the test in their 11th- and 12th-grade years.

So what does that mean? It means we still give tests at the end of the year just like we did when Laura Ingalls Wilder reminded us of a much earlier school life. The tests may look more complex than they did back then, but we all know that there's certainly a lot more information for children to know in 2010. Although end of year assessment is not an exact science yet, it definitely helps all of us know how to help more and more children meet the challenges of today's prairie.

Vicki Barber is superintendent of education for El Dorado County.