

ORIGINAL

TESTIMONY OF ALBERT SHANKER, PRESIDENT
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ON THE NATIONAL ASSESSMENT GOVERNING BOARD'S PROPOSAL
FOR SETTING GRADE-LEVEL ACHIEVEMENT GOALS ON THE NAEP EXAMS

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I come here as a friend of NAEP and as someone who is fundamentally concerned with the central issues of the NAGB "Staff Paper on Setting Goals for the National Assessment," that is, the issues of the quality and utility of NAEP; of national achievement goals; educational standards; the improvement of our schools; and the development of a rich set of concepts for what American students should know and be able to do to secure their future and that of our nation.

I am certainly a supporter of NAEP. I have urged its increased funding, have publicized and used its results widely, contrasted it favorably with national, commercial standardized tests and pressed for NAEP's further improvement.

I am also enthusiastic about setting national achievement goals, as was evident in my response to the Education Summit. Furthermore, because NAEP is a national indicator and one that has been in operation for 20 years, I envision a role for NAEP in helping us measure progress toward national education goals.

Neither do I flinch from the idea of educational standards. We certainly need them. For example, it is ludicrous that, by and large, our elementary school youngsters are mired in the basics -- in endless repetitions of basic arithmetic, for example -- throughout the elementary years, while children in our competitor nations are already dealing with algebraic concepts. And it is unconscionable that we are content to accept achieving at a 6th- or 8th-grade level as a high school graduation

standard. Our students aren't any less intelligent than the rest of the industrialized world's children, but our curriculum standards and expectations of our youngsters seem to be a lot lower. We need to turn that around, and soon.

As you can see, then, I support coming to grips with what we want American students to know and be able to do. And while I do not necessarily support a national curriculum, I do see a need for national curriculum frameworks, such as some subject-matter organizations have developed, and a thoroughgoing reassessment at the state and district levels of the content and goals of education.

But it is because I am so concerned with these issues that I find the NAGB proposal deeply troubling.

First, I have serious reservations about NAGB's interpretation of its congressional mandate to identify "appropriate achievement goals for each grade and subject on the NAEP exams."

Second, I have serious questions about how NAGB proposes to carry out these tasks.

And finally, I have serious concerns about whether NAGB should be assuming all these functions and about whether NAEP's proven value as a national indicator will be compromised by loading it with all sorts of new functions and responsibilities.

NAGB's Interpretation of Its Congressional Authority

Congress directed NAGB to identify "appropriate achievement goals for each grade and subject on the NAEP exams." There are a number of ways of interpreting this direction. For example, we could have as a goal increasing the percentage of 4th graders who have a minimal understanding

of basic scientific procedures, as shown on NAEP, from X% to Y% or increasing the percentage of 8th graders who can produce an adequate writing sample from X% to Y% or the percentage of 12th graders who can do so from X% to Y%.

There are of course other ways of interpreting the directive, and there should be a full discussion of the possibilities and their merits and demerits. But the way that NAGB has interpreted the congressional directive on identifying achievement goals strikes me as the least defensible.

In fact, the NAGB staff paper has very little to say about achievement goals. It is primarily concerned with setting standards of achievement for each grade and subject level, and that is different from identifying goals. Furthermore, NAGB proposes to set a single, unitary standard for each grade level and subject and to report only the proportion of students who reach that standard. Even if one accepts NAGB's interpretation of goal setting as standard setting, there are serious drawbacks to setting only a single standard. Here are just two of them.

First, it would give us less information than we now get from NAEP about the distribution of student performance; in fact, it would ignore the distribution. And second, it would encourage politicians to encourage educators to concentrate primarily on students who were already performing at or near the single standard; those significantly below or above the standard would be short-changed. This is not the direction we want either NAEP or American schools to pursue.

I am also concerned about NAGB's aim, as expressed in the staff paper, to identify the core of knowledge every student ought to master in particular subjects in certain grades. I happen to share that aim. What I

don't share is NAGB's apparent conviction that NAEP ought to or can be used to establish such common cores of knowledge and that NAEP ought to drive curriculum. Indeed, it would be a grave mistake to use a multiple-choice test -- as NAEP largely is, albeit the best of them -- to determine common cores of knowledge and drive curriculum. We have entirely too much of that going on already with the overuse and misuse of the standardized, commercial, multiple-choice tests, and they are a large part of what ails us in education. And using NAEP in this way would make that problem worse, much worse, because we'd in effect have a national multiple-choice test driving curriculum. Given the implication in NAGB's paper that NAEP ought to be administered universally, instead of on the basis of a sample, that danger is very real -- and it must be avoided.

NAGB's Proposal for How to Set Standards

While I do not accept NAGB's argument that setting standards is the same thing as identifying achievement goals, I nonetheless wish to raise some questions about how NAGB proposes to carry out such a standard-setting activity. NAGB proposes to identify the single standard for all students within a grade and in a subject by convening a medium-sized, diverse group of people who will decide which of all the NAEP questions students need to answer correctly in order to demonstrate a reasonable chance of being successful in that subject in the next grade.

I have no doubt that even a diverse, medium-sized group charged with coming to consensus about a bunch of questions will do so, especially if they're under the tight schedule NAGB seems bent on. Again, is equating correctly answering some multiple-choice questions with having mastered a core of knowledge a legitimate and wise move? Should we be setting

national performance standards on the basis of multiple-choice questions? Can this procedure provide us with a valid picture of the proportion of students who will succeed with a given subject in the next grade? If a bunch of multiple-choice questions becomes the proxy for the core of knowledge students should master, isn't there a danger that those test items will become the core? And again -- because it can't be overemphasized -- wouldn't that greatly exacerbate the problem we already face with the high-stakes, commercial, standardized tests that presently drive, and narrow, the curriculum and therefore teaching and learning?

I am hardly a technical expert on assessment. But if we want to set national education standards, the last way I'd want to derive them is from multiple-choice questions. And I'd certainly want a much better answer than the NAGB staff paper provides on whether the items in NAEP, an assessment designed to be a national indicator, can be mined in this way to set standards.

Will NAGB's Proposal Compromise the Proven Utility of NAEP?

While I share NAGB's eagerness for achievement goals, education standards, reaching consensus about what all students should know and be able to do and for assessments that promote school improvement and meaningful accountability, I have grave reservations about whether all this should be on NAGB's plate. NAGB is supposed to govern NAEP, which is a national indicator. But NAGB now also wants, either explicitly or implicitly, to use NAEP to set educational standards, determine common cores of knowledge, drive curriculum and other educational practice and, perhaps, even serve as a universal, national testing system. Can NAEP carry all this freight without destroying its value as a national

indicator? Will NAGB's objectivity and integrity as the governing body of a national indicator be compromised by assuming what is arguably an advocacy function? And what precisely are the tradeoffs between NAEP's assuming all these new functions and improving its quality as a national indicator?

I do not know the answers to these questions, but I do know that the NAGB paper either does not raise them or deals with them inadequately. Yet both NAEP as it now is and the activities discussed in the NAGB paper are too important to let such questions slide.

I am not one of those people who believes that every conceivable (or inconceivable) question must be raised and answered before we do something new or different; that is a prescription for the status quo. But the quality of NAGB's paper -- and the hasty schedule it proposes -- compels me to urge great caution and greater discussion and debate. The stakes are too high to gamble on this proposal in its present state.

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