



Mark Thompson, Vice President, Pearson Education, Inc.

Interview with The Civic Caucus

2104 Girard Ave.S., Minneapolis, MN 55405

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Notes of the Discussion

Present : Janis Clay, Pat Davies, Paul Gilje (coordinator), Joe Graba, Verne Johnson (chair), Sallie Kemper, Ted Kolderie, Dan Loritz (vice chair), Dana Schroeder, Clarence Shallbetter, Mark Thompson.

Summary of Discussion: Mark Thompson asserts three major problems in American education are (1) mediocre U.S. academic rankings against other countries, (2) the lack of consistent, rigorous educational standards state-to-state and nationwide, and (3) U.S. students graduating from high school without the skills and knowledge they need to be successful. He stresses that nationally uniform, rigorous Common Core State Standards and new, next-generation student assessments will ensure that students learn the academic and 21st century skills they need to be successful in postsecondary education and the workforce.

Background . Mark Thompson is Vice President, National Services Assessment and Information at Pearson Education, Inc., a for-profit educational assessment services provider. He has more than 25 years of assessment experience in U.S. and international assessment projects. His background includes online and adaptive testing, innovative items that measure proficiency on the new Common Core State Standards and automated scoring.

The problem. In defining three major problems in American education, Mark Thompson stressed mediocre U.S. academic rankings against other countries, the lack of consistent, rigorous educational standards state-to-state and nationwide, and U.S. students graduating from high school without the skills and knowledge they need to be successful.

1. U.S. students trail global leaders in international rankings in reading, math and science.

According to rankings of over 60 countries by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA), the U.S. currently ranks 15th in reading, 24th in math and 17th in science. PISA is an international organization with over 60 member countries that tests 15 year-olds and uses the results to rank the countries on academic achievement, in reading, math and science.

Countries leading the list include Singapore; Finland; South Korea; Shanghai, China; and Canada.

2. In the U.S. today, educational standards for student learning are not consistent from state-to-state or nationwide and vary in level of rigor.

3. U.S. students are not graduating from high school with the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in postsecondary education or the workforce.

Thompson said that education is not a federal mandate; it's the responsibility of the states. Each state can set educational standards. We don't have a national curriculum. One of the downsides is we don't have consistency and the rigor of standards varies significantly from state-to-state and nationwide.

He noted that through financial and other incentives, Race-to-the-Top, President Obama's signature K-12 initiative, is encouraging states to adopt a set of common core standards.

The goals. In light of these problems with the country's education system, Thompson asserts that two goals, common standards and better assessments, are essential. He believes we should:

1. Develop and adopt common educational standards to ensure students receive a high quality education consistently state-to-state and nationwide and graduate with the skills and knowledge they need to be successful in postsecondary education and the workforce.

2. Develop and implement next-generation assessments that are computer-based; measure students' proficiency on the new common core state standards, critical and analytical thinking, and 21st century skills; and ensure students are on track toward college and career readiness.

These changes are occurring today at a very dramatic pace and it is expected that the goals will be achieved by the 2014-2015 school year, Thompson said.

The strategies.

Thompson's two strategies for meeting those goals include adoption of common standards and the forming of two consortia whose focus is development of new educational assessment systems.

1. Adoption of new Common Core State Standards.

- Thompson said these new common core standards were developed by a partnership of the Council of Chief State School Officers and the National Governors Association. They were written by Achieve, The College Board and ACT, following U.S. Department of Education criteria of higher, fewer, clearer standards that are internationally benchmarked.

- The new common standards have been adopted by 46 states and the District of Columbia. Minnesota is one of four states that have not adopted the standards, along with Texas, Virginia and Nebraska. These four states believe they already have high standards customized to the states' goals. Thompson agreed that Minnesota does have high standards, especially in math.
- Common standards ensure that students are receiving a high quality education, consistent from state-to-state and nationwide.
- The standards ensure that students are prepared for success in postsecondary education and the workforce.

2. Creation of two state consortia.

Two consortia won the competition for two \$180 million grants from the U.S. Department of Education for developing new educational assessment systems: Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC) and Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortia (SBAC).

The federal grants require that these next-generation assessment systems be implemented in the 2014-2015 school year.

The PARCC consortium. This consortium represents 25 million students in 22 member states and the District of Columbia. Its assessment system has four components:

- **Performance-Based Assessment:** Required; includes extended tasks and applications of concepts and skills; done at end of school year; represents total learning of students over the year; generates data for accountability standards.
- **End-of-Year Assessment:** Required; includes innovative, computer-based test items; includes student growth data and data for accountability standards.
- **Diagnostic Assessment:** Optional; done at beginning of school year; acts as early indicator of student knowledge and skills to inform instruction, interventions and professional development during school year.
- **Mid-Year Assessment:** Optional; performance-based; emphasis on hard-to measure standards; timely information to track students throughout the year to allow appropriate adjustments, intervention and professional development.

An additional required component will assess students' speaking and listening skills.

"They'll be much different from the tests kids have been taking up to now," Thompson said of the new assessments. They include new item types that reflect new common core standards, critical and analytical thinking and 21st century skills.

The new tests will all be computer-based tests and will incorporate digital technology and artificial intelligence (AI) scoring

The Smarter Balanced Assessment Consortium. This consortium represents 19 million students in 25 states. Its assessment system is based on four key premises and principles:

- **Use computer adaptive testing.** In this type of testing, when a student takes a test, the next question is based on the student's response to the current question; it continually adapts to present students with test items best suited to their skill level. Also, the test takes less time, because no questions are asked that are too easy or too difficult for the individual student. The main downside of computer-adaptive testing is that it requires a bigger test-item bank, which Thompson said is more expensive to develop and maintain.
- **Use assessment to inform instruction.** Interim assessments during the school year are a big part of the assessment system, as are assets like model curriculum units and professional development tools and resources.
- **Involve teachers in test development and scoring.** The Smarter Balanced consortium requires that assessment contractors like Pearson who are developing the next-generation assessments use local teachers to perform 33 to 50 percent of the new item/task development. Teachers will also score items and performance tasks for which AI scoring is unsuitable.
- **Emphasize evidence-centered design and research-based approaches.**

Based on these principles, the Smarter Balanced assessment system comprises three components:

- **End-of-Year Assessments.** These are computer-adaptive tests, covering English language assessment and math. They are used in grades 3 through 8 and in high school and are given during the last 12 weeks of the school year.
- **Performance Tasks.** These are project and research-based tasks involving multiple classroom sessions. They are designed to assess students' critical and analytical thinking and 21st century skills.
- **Interim Assessments.** These are locally developed, computer-adaptive tests given during the school year. They are designed to measure a smaller set of standards to produce results that can be used to inform instruction.

No contract with Minnesota. In response to a question, Thompson noted that his company, Pearson, is active at the consortia level, supporting both Smarter Balanced and PARCC, and at the state level through contracts with 26 states to develop and administer assessment tests to meet accountability requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB). Pearson does not have a current contract with Minnesota, which is not a member of either consortium. He said Pearson competes with other similar assessment services companies to provide services to states and the consortia.

Costs of assessments. An interviewer commented that in Minnesota and many other states, the emphasis is on cutting expenses, rather than adding them. Thompson replied that the concept of the two consortia is that there will be efficiencies in developing assessments, because they will be common among a group of states. But, he said, "What's likely is that there will be better tests at the same price or better tests for possibly a little higher cost."

He noted that states are not paying anything for the assessment development. It's all federal money right now.

Local decisions. A questioner asked Thompson to describe the kinds of decisions that would be made from these assessments at the local level. Thompson replied, "It's not a national curriculum. It's a common set of standards. How the schools teach to the standards is their local decision. Curriculum, instruction, textbooks, sequence and pace are all local decisions." That is a result of the Constitution's granting to the states all powers not expressly granted to the federal government.

An interviewer commented that it's important to distinguish between what's taught and how it's taught. "Isn't what's taught embedded in the common core standards, but how it's taught is up to the local level? Doesn't it sound like what's taught is embedded in the standards and assessments?"

"You're right," Thompson responded. "The overarching framework of what is taught is incorporated and embedded in the common core standards. How that is taught is still a local decision."

Role of teachers. The interviewer continued. "It seems to me the people in this are operating on the assumption that once they put the standards in, the students will learn. In between the standards and the learning are what the students are willing and able to do and what the teachers are willing and able to do."

Thompson replied, "It's a major challenge to get teachers up to speed on the new common core standards. You've hit that on the head."

Another interviewer commented that there was a struggle in Minnesota for at least 10 to 15 years over different ways of teaching math. He asked whether we're now at the point where the teaching profession has come together to agree on what should be taught. "Is there agreement? Is this what we want to do? Is this what we really want to teach?"

Thompson responded that 46 states have signed on to the new common core state standards. Experts-the College Board, ACT and Achieve-wrote the standards. "If anyone can do it they can," he said.

Timeline. In response to a question, Thompson said the federal grant requires that the new standards and assessments be implemented in the 2014-2015 school year.

Technology needed for new tests . A questioner asked whether there is a similar effort going forward to make sure school districts have the minimum standards of technology for implementing the new tests.

Thompson responded that both consortia cooperated on one contract-awarded to Pearson-for a technology readiness tool. Pearson developed a tool that states can make available for local districts and local schools to use. It first performs an inventory of technology available to implement the new assessments-e.g., number of devices, operating system and bandwidth. The second step is for the consortia to set minimum requirements based on the new assessments being developed right now. "The assessments are technology intensive," he said. "There are many devices in schools that won't support this next generation of assessments."

Thompson said the third step is preparing a gap analysis for each school between the technology inventoried in the school and the minimum technology requirements for the new assessments. Each

school will get a report of the gap analysis. In addition, gap analysis reports will be generated at the district, state and consortia levels.

Common standards. An interviewer commented that there has been considerable discussion about what should go into the new standards. "On one side, some people have the fairly narrow conception that it should just be academic knowledge and skills," he said. "On the other side are people pushing 21st century skills supplementary to that. It sounds like lots of 21st skills are being built into the new standards and assessments."

Thompson replied that the new standards "absolutely reflect critical and analytical thinking and 21st century skills to a much greater degree than current standards." He said 21st century skills include such skills as technology savvy, working in groups, communication, and life skills such as financial literacy.

Need for old assessments . In response to a question, Thompson noted that that while the promise of the new assessments is to measure college and career readiness, there will still be a need for traditional assessments such as the ACT, SAT, and National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The roles of these assessments are likely to change or be redefined in the new landscape of next- generation assessments.

Teacher assessments. Thompson said the assessment of teachers is a big part of the Race-to-the-Top funding. One of the criteria for receiving Race-to-the-Top grants is developing and implementing new educator effectiveness programs. "That's happening right now and it's very controversial," he said. "That was one of the big issues in the Chicago public schools strike."

He asserted that the new comprehensive assessment systems have the capability to generate the data needed to evaluate teachers relative to the performance of the students they teach. "That can go into the teacher evaluations," he said. "One component of a teacher's evaluation will be how well that teacher's students did on the assessments."

He discussed the concept of "value-added." If you look at where an individual student came in and where they came out, you can precisely focus on what value was added by the teacher. The goal is that students will have achieved progress toward college and career readiness as measured by the assessments.

A questioner asked, "Is the teacher evaluated on where the student is against the standards or how much they've moved them, regardless of what the goal may be?"

Thompson answered that the future system goal is that the teacher will be evaluated on the individual progress of each student-where they come in and where they come out. With current assessments, we just look at the whole cohort and whether they are proficient.

Grade level vs. individualized teaching. An interviewer commented that there is a question over whether the teaching is to grade level or whether the teaching is individualized. He said most of what teachers are told to do is to teach to the grade level. "All I hear about the assessments has all been about grade level," he said. "Assessment leaders say that's the way the system is. How do we get to individualizing the learning and not just the assessments?"

Thompson said the new assessments will stay with the grade-level system. Interim assessments will show if a student is behind in math, for example. That will be linked to remedial resources and an intervention can be made. That's individualized learning driven by assessment, but still within a grade-level concept, he said.

Online learning. An interviewer noted that teachers spend their time preparing and delivering lectures. He asked, "Is it your feeling that technology that replaces teachers for the lectures with a nationally known lecturer is coming?"

In the postsecondary world, Thompson said, there is a trend toward developing courses digitally. There's a new concept evolving-massively open online courses (MOOCs), which Stanford, MIT, Harvard and Coursera. They're taking their top instructors and developing online courses that are available worldwide and are virtually free. "The possibilities are endless," he said. "We can look at the opportunities the MOOCs offer and see the future."

College-ready vs. career-ready. An interviewer noted that it seems that "college-ready" and "career-ready" are thought of as the same thing. He asked if there is any effort in the assessments to separate college-ready vs. career-ready and whether there will be any distinction in the standards or assessments.

Thompson said it hasn't been determined yet whether and how the 2014 standards might be different between college-ready and career-ready. That will be done at the consortia level.

Mandate for change . An interviewer commented that there will have to be preparation for transformation in college programs of education to fit with the new standards and assessments. "There's a mandate going on here, big time-either at the national level or state level," he said.

Universal assessment. In response to a question, Thompson said the new assessments will not use sampling, but will be universal.

Exposure of failure. One interviewer noted that some people looking at the new assessments are saying, "Brace yourselves, states, because the first result is going to expose a lot more of the failure that's out there in the American student population."

Conclusion. Thompson concluded by talking about how dramatic these developments in education are. "I've been in this business for 25 years and for the first 20 years, nothing really happened," he said. "It was the same thing, year after year. The pace of change is completely unprecedented-the common core standards, the two consortia, the advent of technology and the federal government support through funding of Race-to-the-Top grants and the two consortia. There is so much going on in the education market right now at such a high pace that this is an exciting place to be and a wonderful thing to be a part of. Everyone is committed to success of the current initiatives and the goal to improve U.S. education."