

High-Stakes Tests
Position Statement
January 2008

The Wisconsin Mathematics Council supports the NCTM position on "High-Stakes Testing" and the supporting recommendations.

WMC Position:

The Wisconsin Mathematics Council believes that a well-conceived system of assessment and accountability must consist of multiple assessment components. High-stakes tests are tests that are used to make significant educational decisions about children, teachers, schools, or school districts. Assessment should be a means of fostering growth toward high expectations and should support high levels of student learning.

High-stakes tests will:

- consist of multiple sources of assessment information
- utilize assessment methods that are appropriate for their intent
- advance students' learning and inform teachers as they make instructional decisions
- be an open process with everyone knowing what is expected, what will be measured, and what the results imply for future actions
- be valid and reliable for the intended purposes
- provide students with multiple opportunities to demonstrate proficiency
- provide appropriate accommodations for students with special needs or limited English proficiency
- be used as one of multiple measures in making high-stakes decisions about students
- align with the NCTM Standards and Wisconsin Model Academic Standards for Mathematics

NCTM Position on High-Stakes Tests

The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics recognizes the importance of measuring the learning of students and the effectiveness of instruction. Large-scale tests can and should be among several measures that are used to make significant decisions about students and instruction. However, such critical decisions about students and instruction must involve more than the results of any single test. We strongly support a balance of day-to-day classroom assessments, which help teachers improve instruction, and external tests that track progress and provide for national comparisons.

Large-scale tests are widely used in decisions related to promotion, graduation, admission to college, and school accreditation. Some view such high-stakes testing as a way to raise expectations and to hold students, teachers, and administrators accountable. Basing major decisions about students, teachers, schools, or instructional programs on a single test is inappropriate and inconsistent with what we know about learning and assessment. Tests, after all, are snapshots that capture one event in one context rather than a wide array of events in multiple contexts. The results of large-scale tests must be balanced against a broader sampling of student performance.

Valid, reliable large-scale assessments are useful and important tools for examining students' progress and making a variety of comparisons. However, because they may not measure the full range of important mathematics, they must be combined with a more complete sampling of student performance. This sampling might include classwork, tests, quizzes, observations, projects, and interviews. Such a collection of both informal and formal assessments can provide teachers and others with a more complete picture of student performance. By contrast, placing too much emphasis on a single test or on testing can undermine the quality of education and jeopardize equality of opportunity.

Given the pressures of high-stakes testing, teachers may commit too much instructional time to the mathematics that appears on tests. This mathematics is often limited to what can be readily tested in multiple-choice format. Furthermore, many large-scale tests focus disproportionately on simple mathematical outcomes. According to a recent study, "The most challenging standards and objectives are the ones that are undersampled or omitted entirely ... [and those] that call for high-level reasoning are often omitted in favor of much simpler cognitive processes." (Achieve, 2003)

Assessment can and should be used to measure students' growth and inform instruction. Using information from a range of assessments, teachers can diagnose students' difficulties and strengths and modify instruction so that all students can increase their mathematics learning. Such a range of assessments should also be considered for high-stakes decisions about students and the effectiveness of instruction at the school and district level.

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<http://www.nctm.org/about/content.aspx?id=6356>