

**REPORTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS ON  
PARTICIPATION ISSUES**

# D-R-A-F-T 03-28-05

## Ad Hoc Committee on NAEP 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Participation and Motivation

### Preliminary Recommendations

For

### Discussion with the National Assessment Governing Board

#### Preamble

The Nation's Report Card (NAEP) at the 12<sup>th</sup> grade must rely on the interest, endorsement, and active support of superintendents, principals, and teachers to encourage students to participate and try hard. These are the people closest to the students who, students have told us, have the greatest influence on their decision to participate.

However, superintendents, principals, and teachers—historically—have been given the least reason to support and encourage participation in the Report Card at the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. If the Nation's Report Card does not change its orientation to make participation attractive to superintendents, principals and teachers, the prospect of the 12<sup>th</sup> grade Report Card becoming extinct looms as a distinct possibility.

The Ad Hoc Committee on NAEP 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Participation and Motivation recommends major changes—a paradigm shift—in the way the Nation's Report Card is explained to participants at the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. There must be a sharper focus on the mission and purpose of the Report Card at the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The benefits of participation must be made clear, relevant, and attractive. Much more time and resources must be devoted to personal communications with the superintendents, principals, teachers, and students who will be affected.

The paradigm shift being recommended is the following—from trying to get “more data, better” to serving the “customer” better—the superintendents, principals, and teachers whose active support will be needed and the students who will sit for the assessment.

Consistent with this goal, the Ad Hoc Committee developed the following set of recommendations. A clearer mission and purpose, tied to communicating the benefits of participation in more direct, personal ways, along with feedback to participants, is the centerpiece. An important part of this is the first recommendation:

- 1. “Sell” participation in the 12<sup>th</sup> grade Nation's Report Card based on the benefits of proposed statewide professional development conferences**

Shortly after the 12<sup>th</sup> grade state sample is drawn, usually 6-12 months before the assessment, an experienced educator, knowledgeable about the content of NAEP, would meet in-person with the superintendent, principal and teachers (perhaps the Department chair and others) who teach the subject(s) being assessed. Assuming that 12<sup>th</sup> grade testing is moved to the fall (see recommendation 5, below), this meeting will occur in the school year prior to testing. In the

meeting, the purpose and mission of NAEP are explained and the test framework(s) is reviewed. A demonstration is provided showing the ease with which NAEP questions and data can be accessed via the Internet. The NAEP representative provides assurance that NAEP data will not be reported in a form that can be used to "harm" schools, teachers or students, result in school rankings, or produce individual student score reports to the schools. The principals and teachers are given the opportunity to ask any questions they may have about the assessment.

The NAEP representative then makes the following offer, designed to demonstrate how participation can have practical, useful benefits:

If –

- (1) the principal and teachers agree to explain to students why their participation is important, describe how it will be of benefit; and encourage the students to take the test seriously;
- (2) "X" percent of the students selected for the sample actually take it; and
- (3) objective indicators applied to the test administration indicate that the students were appropriately engaged in the testing process,

then a team from the school will be invited to a state-wide conference/workshop, hosted and facilitated by the State Education Agency, to review with peers from other participating high schools, relevant state and local data, along with the state's NAEP results, with the aim of using all of the data to inform discussions about ways to improve student achievement. The financial resources to conduct the meeting would be provided by the NAEP program, but the agenda and content of the conference would be under the complete control of the State Education Agency.

After the school agrees to participate, the NAEP representative remains in contact with the school, answering questions about NAEP, providing relevant NAEP reports as they are released, and supplying information and resources about NAEP to be used by teachers with students in explaining why their participation is important. Before the end of the school year, the State's 12<sup>th</sup> grade NAEP data are made available and the state-wide conference/workshop is conducted for the teams from the NAEP participating schools.

## 2. Mission and Purpose of 12<sup>th</sup> Grade NAEP

**The National Assessment Governing Board should adopt a mission statement for the Nation's Report Card at the 12<sup>th</sup> grade that explains its purpose in clear prose and provides compelling reasons for superintendents, principals, teachers, and 12<sup>th</sup> grade students selected for the sample to participate and for the students to put forth appropriate effort in taking the assessment.**

The majority of the American public is virtually unaware of the existence of the Nation's Report Card at the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Worse yet, NAEP is unfamiliar to the very superintendents, principals, teachers, and students who must be relied upon for the assessment's successful implementation. NAEP's mission and purpose were either unknown to or only vaguely understood by the more

than 500 students, parents, and school staff interviewed in focus groups conducted for the Governing Board. Interviews with over 100 individuals from the private sector found a similar lack of familiarity with NAEP. In informal surveys conducted by Governing Board staff at professional meetings, fewer than one in six say they have even basic knowledge about the Nation's Report Card. This widespread lack of knowledge about 12<sup>th</sup> grade NAEP among the schools and students selected for the 12<sup>th</sup> grade sample is a massive barrier to participation.

The first step in overcoming this barrier is the development of a clear, persuasive mission statement for NAEP. It will be based on the NAEP legislation and on the Governing Board's decisions on the recommendations contained herein.

### 3. Communications with NAEP Participants

**The National Assessment Governing Board should adopt policies and prepare materials that will significantly alter and improve the effectiveness of communications with NAEP participants consistent with the principles below. The Governing Board should encourage the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) to implement these principles, both directly and through their contractors:**

- 1. Greater emphasis should be placed on person-to-person communications with the superintendents and principals who will be deciding whether to participate, the teachers who will be asked to encourage students to put forth reasonable effort, and to the students to help them understand what the benefits are of their participation.**
- 2. Superintendents, principals and teachers should be given persuasive, compelling reasons to participate in 12<sup>th</sup> grade NAEP. The approach should appeal more to their professional interest in improving achievement rather than in meeting legal requirements or altruism.**
- 3. Principals and teachers should be (a) asked explicitly to explain to students why their participation is important and what the benefits will be, and (b) given materials and other resources (including appropriate incentives) designed to be effective in eliciting student participation and appropriate effort.**
- 4. Representatives of the NAEP program who meet directly with superintendents, principals and teachers to elicit their commitment to participate in 12th grade NAEP should (a) be knowledgeable about and committed to the mission and purpose of the Nation's Report Card, (b) be recognized for their educational expertise, and (c) possess strong oral and written communication skills.**

- 5. All communications to participants, both oral and written, should explain the mission and purpose of the Nation's Report Card in clear and compelling terms, provide information about the content of NAEP frameworks, be persuasive about the reasons for and benefits of participating, be appropriately targeted for superintendents, principals, teachers, students, and parents, and ask superintendents, principals and teachers explicitly to encourage participation in the assessment.**
- 6. Communications should be specifically developed for non-public schools, addressing the unique barriers to participation they experience.**

A dramatic "paradigm shift" in communications—both in message and messenger—is needed for the NAEP program. StandardsWork—a contractor hired by the Governing Board—reviewed the communications the NAEP program provides to high schools selected for the NAEP sample. StandardsWork found that

- The written materials focus primarily on procedures and requirements related to the conduct of the assessment rather than on the purpose and importance of the assessment and why it is in the interest of the schools to encourage students to participate.
- Students are largely ignored in the materials sent to schools and the letter that is directed to students "lacks credibility" with students.
- The tone and content of the current written communications are plaintive, authoritarian, bureaucratic, and compliance oriented rather than engaging, persuasive, and oriented toward inspiring action to encourage quality participation. A sample of a letter sent to principals selected for the sample was viewed as a "classic form [letter], written by no one in particular and sent to no one in particular."
- There is little to no emphasis on the quality of the test frameworks and the content of the assessment, although most principals and teachers would want to know the value of a test before giving up class time.
- In-person contact with schools is limited to "converting refusals" to participate, a missed opportunity to engage principals and teachers on the importance and benefits of participating and in gaining agreement of principals and teachers to encourage their students to participate.
- In sum, the materials and approaches to communications as currently conceived are more likely to discourage participation than to foster it.

StandardsWork reported a consistent refrain throughout the interviews and focus groups conducted with superintendents, principals, teachers, and students: Principals, teachers, and students must be (1) given a clear understanding of NAEP's mission and purpose, and (2) be persuaded that the mission and purpose are important, relevant, and beneficial to them. Accomplishing this is an essential first step in gaining the cooperation of principals to agree to

have their school participate, teachers to encourage students to show up for the assessment and try hard, and for students to take the assessment seriously.

Governing Board staff met with representatives of private schools to determine the barriers to participation and possible solutions. Generally, private schools are autonomous; they are not subject to control or direction by central authorities. The primary strategy the NAEP program has employed is to obtain a letter of support for participation in the Nation's Report Card from the school's parent organization and to use this as leverage. However, the private school representatives noted that such letters are viewed as advisory and non-binding on the school head, in contrast with a directive that might come from a school district superintendent. Private schools view their programs as unique in ways that would not be captured in a national assessment. This sector wonders, in particular, "What are the benefits of participation to non-public schools?" and worries that the data will be used in ways inimical to their interests—e.g., through the rankings of schools. Concern also was expressed about the manner in which some of the staff working for the data collection contractor approach the private school participants and suggested that the staff be trained specifically in more effective ways to approach private schools. As was the case with the public school respondents in the StandardsWork research, private schools want to know the mission and purpose of the Nation's Report Card and the benefits of participation. Consequently, communications aimed at gaining the support of the head of a private school will require compelling answers to the unique issues they raise.

#### **A "Paradigm Shift"**

What might a "paradigm shift" in communications look like? The primary elements of such a shift would include the following changes:

- from the use of written communication as the primary means of eliciting participation to personal communication;
- from law, regulation, and altruism being the primary reason for participation to mission, purpose, and benefit to school improvement being the primary reason;
- from a focus solely on administrative process and checklists to a greater emphasis on the benefits arising from participation.

#### 4. Preparedness for Postsecondary Pursuits

**The National Assessment Governing Board should review—and revise as needed—the test frameworks, test items, and achievement levels used in the Nation's Report Card with the objective of reporting 12<sup>th</sup> grade students' preparedness for college-credit coursework, training for employment, and entrance into the military.**

The Ad Hoc Committee recommends unanimously that the Nation's Report Card should report on "preparedness." With a compelling purpose attached to the Nation's Report Card, principals, teachers, and students will have a good reason to participate. The importance of "preparedness" as a purpose is clear and the NAEP 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Commission expressed it well:

“...[twelfth] grade is the major point of transition to higher education, training for employment, and entrance into the military. There currently is no dependable source of information about the readiness of 12<sup>th</sup> graders for these destinations, but that information is critically important and NAEP is uniquely positioned to provide it.

Thirty-five years ago and more, a high school diploma was the primary target of education. At the time, it was considered a sufficient prerequisite for getting a job that could sustain an individual and a family and adequate preparation for meeting civic obligations. Today, this is hardly true at all. The earnings gap between those with only a high school diploma and those with postsecondary education and training has widened substantially and the technological/scientific, legal, and moral complexity of today’s public policy issues require more to be an “informed citizen” in a democracy.

As our economy moves increasingly from production to service, from manufactured goods to information, from line workers acting in isolation following specific instructions to workers acting collaboratively making independent decisions, and as using technology becomes a part of more job descriptions, a high school education will no longer suffice.

Similarly, expectations are changing for the majority of students about the endpoint of formal education. Today, approximately 88 percent of 8<sup>th</sup> grade students say that they want to attend higher education and about 70 percent of high school graduates do enroll in postsecondary education and training within two years after graduating.<sup>1</sup> However, possession of a high school diploma in itself often does not equate with the competencies needed to be ready for college credit course work or for training for high performance jobs. Many students are finding themselves accepted into college, but—often to the surprise of their parents and themselves—enrolled in “remedial” or “developmental” classes in reading, writing, and mathematics. This adds costs to a college education, increases the time needed to earn a degree, and has the greatest negative impact on low-income students—the very students most at-risk of not finishing. NAEP would provide an important and needed service by reporting on the readiness of 12<sup>th</sup> graders for postsecondary learning—that is, for higher education, training for employment, and entrance into the military—and by illustrating in its reports the competencies that reflect such readiness.”<sup>2</sup>

Support is widespread and growing for the goal of ensuring that high school graduates are well prepared for the futures before them. The National Association of Secondary School Principals has long advocated for high school reform and acknowledged the importance of “Preparing students for a successful postsecondary future—whether in the workplace or on a campus...” The National Governors Association (NGA) has adopted high school reform as a major

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<sup>1</sup> Kirst, Michael; “College Preparation and Grade 12 NAEP”; paper prepared for the National Commission on NAEP 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Assessment and Reporting; August 2003.

<sup>2</sup> National Commission on NAEP 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Assessment and Reporting; “12<sup>th</sup> Grade Student Achievement in America: A New Vision for NAEP”; March 5, 2004.

initiative. According to NGA Chairman Governor Mark Warner, "This year, states will begin to implement changes in high schools themselves and to rethink expectations for postsecondary education and workforce success." President Bush has proposed a high school reform initiative designed "to ensure that every high school student graduates with the skills needed to succeed in college and in a globally competitive workforce."

Redesigning the Nation's Report Card to report on the preparedness of 12<sup>th</sup> graders for college-credit coursework, training for employment, and entrance into the military is relevant, timely, and needed. It will require a comprehensive review of test frameworks, questions, and achievement levels. Focusing NAEP's purpose at the 12<sup>th</sup> grade on "preparedness" will serve the emerging consensus and, thus, vastly increase its usefulness and use. In turn, the evident importance of the NAEP data will provide a persuasive and compelling reason for schools and students to participate seriously in NAEP.

#### 5. Time of Year for Testing

**The National Assessment Governing Board should change the time of year for testing 12<sup>th</sup> grade students from the late winter to late fall.**

Anecdotal evidence has suggested that there would be advantages to administering NAEP at the 12<sup>th</sup> grade in the late fall of the senior year (e.g., November-December) rather than the late winter (i.e., the last week in January through the first week in March). This anecdotal evidence was strongly confirmed through the interviews and focus groups StandardsWork conducted with superintendents, principals, teachers, and students.

The advantages of changing the testing time include: having test taking occur prior to the so-called "senior slide" that is reported to occur in the second semester of the senior year; a greater likelihood that students will participate in the assessment and take it seriously; the general lack of other state or school-based standardized testing targeted at 12<sup>th</sup> grade; and, with 6-month reporting for reading and mathematics being feasible, the possibility of reporting results before the students graduate.

There are, however, some potential disadvantages. First, there is uncertainty about being able to schedule the assessments in high schools in the late fall. Second, there are questions about whether fall results truly represent "12<sup>th</sup> grade achievement," especially in mathematics. Third, if fall results do not represent "12<sup>th</sup> grade achievement," the ability of NAEP to report on "preparedness for higher education" may be constrained.

While it is clear that changing the testing date to the late fall is likely to have beneficial effects on participation and effort, this must be balanced against threats to being able to report validly on "preparedness." Ultimately, the Governing Board will need to make this determination. However, the Ad Hoc Committee recommends that NAEP 12<sup>th</sup> grade testing be moved from the late winter to the late fall.

