Some Prerequisites for the Establishment of Equitable, Inclusive Multicultural Assessment Systems

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Among the problems facing low-income and minority-group populations in U.S. schools is the use of culturally biased tests and assessments in ways that exclude students from access to high quality education. Student populations who have been historically excluded often develop cultures of resistance to schooling, and the communities from which they come are often alienated from school systems. The role of assessment in addressing these problems involves developing and implementing culturally sensitive performance assessments for classroom and program use; ensuring congruence among assessments, curriculum and instruction; and using assessment results to improve curriculum, instruction and school programs.

Performance assessments, particularly documentation and analysis of cognitively rich, culturally sensitive classroom-based learning, have the potential to foster multicultural inclusion, help stop school practices that generate student resistance and alienation, and thereby facilitate enhanced in-school learning. Creating and implementing such assessments will require that educators and policymakers involve community members, including parents and students, in shaping goals, standards, staff development, curriculum, and instruction, as well as assessment. These assessments must be developed for classroom use and for evaluating programs, but they must be organized in a coherent system that does not undermine the primary use, which is to assist instruction and learning. Active

*The author would like to gratefully thank Cinthia Schuman, Veda Wright, Robert Schaeffer, Karen Orton, Lisa Michael and Marilyn Yohe for advice and support.
steps must be taken to use these assessments to combat bias and discrimination and ensure a multicultural approach. An assessment system must also have safeguards for student rights and to ensure community participation in developing and reviewing assessments.

In recent debates over performance assessment and the role of assessment in shaping educational reform (Commission on Chapter 1, 1992; FairTest Examiner, 1991, 1992, 1993; Linn, Baker, & Dunbar, 1991; Linn & Baker, 1992; Maeroff, 1991; Mehrens, 1992; National Council on Education Standards and Testing, 1992; Neill, 1993b; From Risk to Renewal, 1993), little detailed attention has been paid to how new assessments will help students in the United States who historically have not obtained a high quality education. Some policymakers have asserted that new assessments tied to high standards will help produce improvements in schools (Commission on Chapter 1, 1992; National Council on Education Standards and Testing, 1992). Others have warned that unless a variety of measures are taken involving resources, curriculum, instruction, and staff development, assessment reforms will not succeed in improving education for the disadvantaged (FairTest Examiner, 1991, 1992, 1993).

Evidence abounds about the ways in which schools act to exclude students of color, students whose first language is not English, students with disabilities, and students from low-income and working-class backgrounds (Howe & Edelman, 1985); on how tracking operates along lines of class, race and gender (Oakes 1985, 1990); and on how students from historically excluded populations develop cultures of resistance to schooling (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Gaskell, 1985; Giroux, 1983; MacLeod, 1987; Ogbu, 1987, 1992). Evidence is beginning to appear on how multicultural education has acted as a means of enabling the inclusion of these students on terms other than those of the dominant groups by reshaping classroom and school cultures (Multicultural Education, 1992; Sleeter & Grant, 1987; Viadero, 1990). But there have been few efforts to use the evidence from studies of resistance or multiculturalism to help develop and implement new forms of assessment. Additionally, there is little evidence that historically excluded populations\textsuperscript{1} have been involved in shaping goals, standards, curriculum, instruction or assessments (Diversity and Equity in Assessment Network, 1993 [see Appendix B]).

\textsuperscript{1} The term historically excluded will be used to avoid the continuous listing of students from low-income families i.e., African Americans, Mexican Americans, Puerto Ricans, and American Indians; as First and Willshire Carrera (1988) point out, similar forms of exclusion face some, but not all, recent immigrants. Obviously, not all students of color are poor and some low-income students and students of color do well in school. But as groups, they continue to suffer discriminatory and exclusionary practices.