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## Reinventing something like a wheel

By John McClaughry

After 10 years of Act 60's grand reform of Vermont education, inflation-adjusted per pupil spending in Vermont public schools has risen by 44 percent. Taxpayers asked to spend more than \$13,000 per pupil rightly wonder whether this startling amount of money is producing equally startling educational results.

How to assess educational outcomes has bedeviled public education for decades. In the progressive late 1960s, Education Commissioner Harvey Scribner argued passionately that every child's accomplishments must be measured only in terms of his or her own potential. Performance on standardized tests thus meant nothing.

Happily that era is largely past. The idea that schools should be held accountable for the achievements of their pupils has for some years been a majority view, although it is still outspokenly condemned by certain educational interest groups fearful of being made to look bad by low pupil performance.

Holding schools accountable requires agreement on the goals of education, carried out in a curriculum. Once goals and curriculum are agreed on, there is the further question of how best to assess pupil progress toward meeting those goals.

The National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) was created some years ago to compare states' achievements in meeting high national standards. For years, Vermont refused to let NAEP test a sample of its schoolchildren, but since 1996 participation has increased to include periodic testing in grades 4 and 8 in math, reading, science, and writing. NAEP grades states (but not schools) on the percentage of pupils who test "basic," "proficient," and "advanced." In 2005, Vermont's fourth and eighth grade pupils scored between 41 and 50 percent "proficient" or better in math and reading. In the aggregate, this is about 3.5 percent better than the U.S. average.

Beginning in 2005 Vermont, Rhode Island, and New Hampshire adopted a custom made assessment called the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP). Its results showed that Vermont pupils (grades 3



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and 8) were 68 percent "proficient" in reading and 63 percent "proficient" in math.

Apparently, Vermont's NECAP is around 30 percent more generous than the national tests in scoring pupils as "proficient." This at least raises the suspi-

similar SAT, should be used as a statewide secondary school assessment. January has come and gone, and it is clear that Commissioner Richard Cate, an avid NECAP partisan, is not inclined to address that question.

Illinois has used the college-oriented ACT, with its non-college career preparation section called Work Keys, since 1994, and it has been adopted or is being adopted as the high school assessment method in five other states. Unlike the ponderous NECAP process, the ACT test fits much more smoothly into the school schedule, and yields test results in four weeks. It would provide for free what about half of Vermont's parents of college-bound seniors are now paying for out of their own pockets.

Best of all, from the taxpayer's point of view, it doesn't require \$2.6 million a year of their mon-

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cion that the three New England states, by inventing their own homemade tests, have contrived to upscale their pupil ratings, making it look to the voters like they are producing 30 percent more proficiency than the country as a whole. And since only three states are using NECAP, it is not possible to compare Vermont pupils with those of any of the other 47 states, including notably those like Utah, that get far better results with considerably less money.

Vermont's Education Department is now starting to create NECAP assessment instruments for high schoolers. This process will require millions of dollars from the taxpayers of the three states — \$600,000 from each just to devise the science component. Isn't there a better — and cheaper — way?

Actually there is: using the long-established American College Test (ACT).

Last May, the Legislature instructed the education commissioner to report back this January on whether the ACT test, or the

ey to pay educators to reinvent something resembling a wheel. The cost of giving the state's 8,800 11th graders the ACT test, plus Work Keys, plus a science augmentation, comes to \$75 per pupil, or \$660,000 per year.

It is clear, though, that the department won't even consider this alternative unless forced to by the Legislature. Eight senators, both liberals and conservatives, are sponsoring a bill (S.86) to do just that. The bill would impose requirements on the state's assessment process that NECAP almost certainly cannot meet, but ACT can.

The bill requires the department to present a detailed report by Dec. 1. The only thing missing is a section providing that if a satisfactory report is not delivered by that date, the department shall not expend any additional funds to pay its 20 most highly paid employees. ☐

*John McClaughry is president of the Ethan Allen Institute. For more information, visit [www.ethanallen.org](http://www.ethanallen.org).*