KNOW WHAT YOU WANT STUDENTS TO LEARN AND ENSURE THEY LEARN IT

by Tom Spencer, ACCS

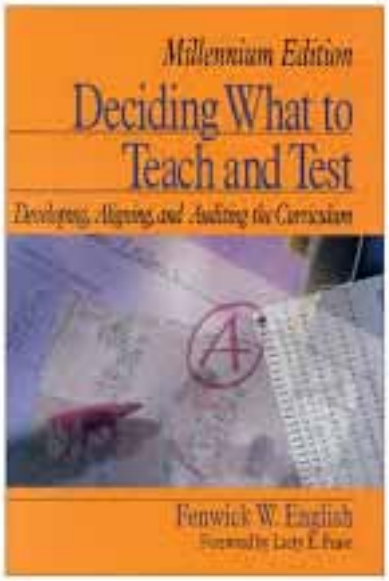
Let's say that you wanted to control what is taught in classrooms across the nation. How would you go about it? Given the tradition of local control of schools in the United States, at first glance this would seem difficult, if not impossible. If you candidly stated your desire to do so, you would likely face loud opposition from school administrators, teachers' unions, and parents.

But while a frontal assault to mandate curriculum[1] might not be successful, there are things related to schools that you might be able to control, that would eventually have an impact on what is taught in classrooms.

If you had a standardized test that most people were familiar with, say one where the results were tied to significant outcomes for students, perhaps college admissions and potential scholarship money, you would have a powerful tool. Now, let's say that you were able to change the content areas covered by the test, knowing that people will continue to pay attention to the test scores. You would then have a better chance of influencing the content taught in classrooms across the country. This would be especially true if educators, without question, presumed that they needed to continue to have their students use this same test.

But would anyone really change a test in an effort to influence what students are taught?

The ideas in this article are based on the work of Fenwick English, particularly those found in his book "*Deciding What to Teach and Test: Developing, Aligning, and Auditing the Curriculum.*" This book



is a short, helpful, and inexpensive work.

Classical Christian educators frequently challenge assumptions about traditional education. This is a trait common to those who have decided to start their own schools. These innovators question prevailing wisdom about many topics, including subjects commonly taught in colleges of education, like the importance of curriculum development and the necessity of standardized testing. *Deciding What to Teach and Test* would be beneficial

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reading for anyone responsible for curriculum development and standardized testing.

Fenwick English writes from a perspective not just as an educator, but also as one with a business background, having worked for a time as a partner in a Big Eight accounting and consulting firm. He transfers principles of business plans and financial audits to education. Consequently his recommendations are practical and realistic.

WHAT DO YOU WANT STUDENTS TO LEARN?

Does your school have a document that specifies the things that you want students to learn while they attend your school? The best way to address curriculum development,[2] standardized testing, and even hiring teachers begins by identifying what you want students to learn. In a K-12 school, this description should identify the "processes, skills, knowledge, and attitudes" that your graduates will possess when they receive their diploma.

When schools identify the things that they want students to learn, it improves the chances that students will actually learn those things and it provides an opportunity to share these goals with parents, teachers, and students. It also helps educators focus their time and effort teaching the things that are most important.

Such a list would include more than course objectives from specific courses. Students learn both inside and outside the classroom, formally and informally. Students imitate their teachers. Schools have standards for student behavior and discipline. Schools will choose to participate in some activities but will decide not to participate in others. Some topics will be judged appropriate for assemblies, others won't. Students are taught by each of these things.

The list should include more than knowledge; it might also include attitudes or beliefs. For example, beliefs in a pro-life position or a biblical definition of marriage might be included. Schools might purpose to graduate students who "love learning." The point is to think through what you want graduates to attain while they spend time at your school.

If schools take the time and do the work to define what students should learn, they can take back the role that has frequently been ceded to textbook publishers and test makers.

HOW WILL LEARNING BE ASSESSED?

Once the list is developed, schools must plan how to assess how well students are learning.

Have you ever read this qualifier when schools release standardized test scores to parents, "these scores are only one measurement of student learning?" Schools want to remind parents not to put too much emphasis on standardized test scores. But this statement suggests that there are other measures of student learning. What are those other measures? Report cards? Anything else? What other means is the school using to figure out what students are learning?

Schools might conduct exit interviews with graduating seniors. Parents could be surveyed to gain their perspective on what students have learned. Schools might survey recent graduates. The evaluation doesn't have to be limited to written tests. Written tests, both teacher-made tests and standardized, are a common way, but only one way, to assess what students have learned. As English points out, it is a mistake to limit our expectations for student learning to that which can be assessed on a written, multiple-choice test.

STANDARDIZED TESTS

Many items on your list of expected student learning will best be evaluated by a written test. Teacher-made tests have some use, provided that they reliably measure student learning. But

teacher-made classroom tests don't tell you anything about how well the students in your school are learning compared to their peers studying in other schools. Test reliability for standardized tests is known and these tests, used properly, can help schools understand what subjects students are learning well (or what subjects teachers are teaching well) and identify what subjects need more development.

There is an ideal, a better, and a poor way to the order of developing curriculum (including identifying textbooks, if any) and selecting particular standardized tests. The ideal way is first to develop goals for student learning and then find a test that actually measures those goals. The better way is to develop the objectives for student learning, the curriculum, and select a test simultaneously. Once you find a test that measures those same items, your teachers will "teach to the test" by following the curriculum during the year.

Some are uncomfortable with the notion of "teaching to the test." But if you think that teaching to the test is wrong, don't allow your football and basketball coaches to scout their opponents next season. (Fenwick English uses a number of football analogies in his book.)

Companies that publish standardized tests want to keep the test questions a secret. (They presume "randomness" in order to achieve results that fall upon a "normal curve.") This makes it a challenge to complete the necessary step of determining how well the school's written plan (or curriculum) matches up with the items measured by the standardized test. However, if you don't have a match between the curriculum and the test, the results won't tell you anything about the effectiveness of classroom instruction. This makes it impossible to use test results to determine where to focus efforts to improve instruction.[3]

If you are familiar with AP courses, you are already familiar with the idea of a match between the written curriculum and the test. Those planning to have students take AP exams are able to order materials from the College Board that define and explain the content that should be taught in the course. These materials include textbook recommendations. This represents "tight" curriculum alignment where the written curriculum, the tested curriculum, and the taught curriculum focus on the same content.

CART BEFORE HORSE

It is a mistake is to adopt a standardized test before developing a written curriculum. Doing so may lead to student learning being restricted to those things that may be evaluated on a multiple-choice test. Schools may focus on these things to the exclusion of everything else, especially in situations of "high-stakes" testing.

When schools receive and release test scores, poor results will soon drive curriculum changes. (The revised SAT exam may have this effect on schools that don't think this through clearly.) Schools with low scores will revise the curriculum to match the test—in this way, testing drives curriculum and instruction. This is clearly seen in many public schools, especially in today's climate where test scores are everything.

Another mistake is to adopt a test that doesn't match the written curriculum. In this case, schools that use standardized tests aren't measuring student learning as much as they are measuring the socio-economic status of their families.[4]

When schools use tests that are aligned with their curriculum, test results can help improve student learning. Schools may analyze results to find those areas where performance doesn't match expectations for student learning. Once these areas are identified, curriculum may be revised and more time may be given to particular areas needing improvement. Staff training or staff development in these areas may be required. This process is similar to what the

football coach does in planning practice after watching the game film with his players. Practice plans for the following week are adjusted.

IN DEBT TO FENWICK ENGLISH

I've read, re-read, and referred to several books by Fenwick English on curriculum development. Deciding What to Teach and Test includes many more ideas than presented in this short article. For example, he describes how to develop curriculum guides that are useful to teachers and how such guides meet the needs of "loose-tight" organizations, i.e., "organizations that are tight on vision and mission and loose on methods and how-to's." Thoughtful classical, Christian schools should be such organizations.

By starting with a coherent philosophy of education, classical Christian schools have a great advantage. Following effective practices in writing, testing, and testing curriculum can help schools deliver a great education to their students.

NOTES:

1. Fenwick English, *Deciding What to Teach and Test: Developing, Aligning, and Auditing the Curriculum* (Corwin Press, 1992), 2. "The word curriculum didn't come into widespread use in education until textbooks were used in preparing teachers in normal schools. That didn't occur until 1900."

2. English, x. ". . . the function of curriculum is to shape the work of classroom teachers."

3. English, 75. "If a test does not match a school's curriculum, how can test scores be used as a measure of the quality of the curriculum?"

4. English, 6. "The minute that curriculum becomes focused on and connected to, as well as aligned with tests, the influence of socioeconomic level on test performance declines."