

## REASSESSING ASSESSMENT TESTS

THE **NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT** IS FAR FROM PERFECT, BUT IS IT A STEP IN THE RIGHT DIRECTION?

COLUMNISTS RUBEN NAVARRETTE, JR. AND DR. EDUARDO PADRÓN TAKE A STAND ON OPPOSITE SIDES OF THE ARGUMENT.

### WHAT DID JOHNNY REALLY LEARN TODAY?

By Dr. Eduardo J. Padrón

Educators understand the basic truth that no one can learn for anyone else. Each one of us experiences the world in a unique and individual fashion. But we educators are very protective of the learning process and our students. We build a support system that offers the best possible chance to achieve new understanding. We search for the brightest and most dedicated faculty and encourage them to develop creative teaching methods and relevant, exciting curricula. Providing excellent facilities, advanced classroom technology, advisement and tutoring are essential support elements.

With all of this in place, we then want to know if our teaching and learning enterprise has been successful. Assessment is the essential closing of the learning loop that guides tomorrow's efforts. Needless to say, assessment methods should be as discerning and creative as all the other events in the learning experience.

The federal government and numerous state legislatures have imposed a rash of testing requirements on K-12 educators, with Congress intimating that similar legislation may be in the offing for higher education. This is a raging debate with critics bemoaning the limits of these assessment

instruments and worse, the impact on the breadth and depth of learning in the classroom. "Teaching to the test," at the expense of many aspects of curriculum that have enriched the classroom day, has become the mandate in countless K-12 classrooms, with state and federal monies riding on the performance of students and schools.

We do not understand nearly enough about the learning process. But a valid question to ask is if our growing obsession with testing will ultimately help in this exploration. While our best researchers and teachers agree on the importance of assessment, they tell us that understanding—genuine comfort with ideas and abstractions, so they can be applied with confidence—requires patience. Our present testing methods might be systematically eliminating that patience from our learning environments. A child's developmental age, learning style and personality or temperament all influence how the child learns. Hurrying students to recall content in service to a test score and a grade sends a reckless message, one that devalues reflection and self discovery.

Teachers who care about their students are accountable by nature. But accountability at the expense of creativity is a short-lived



triumph. As a middle-school teacher in Baltimore observed, one of hundreds commenting on the National Education Association website, "Since my students have begun to take the tests to show that we are meeting [NCLB] standards, their understanding

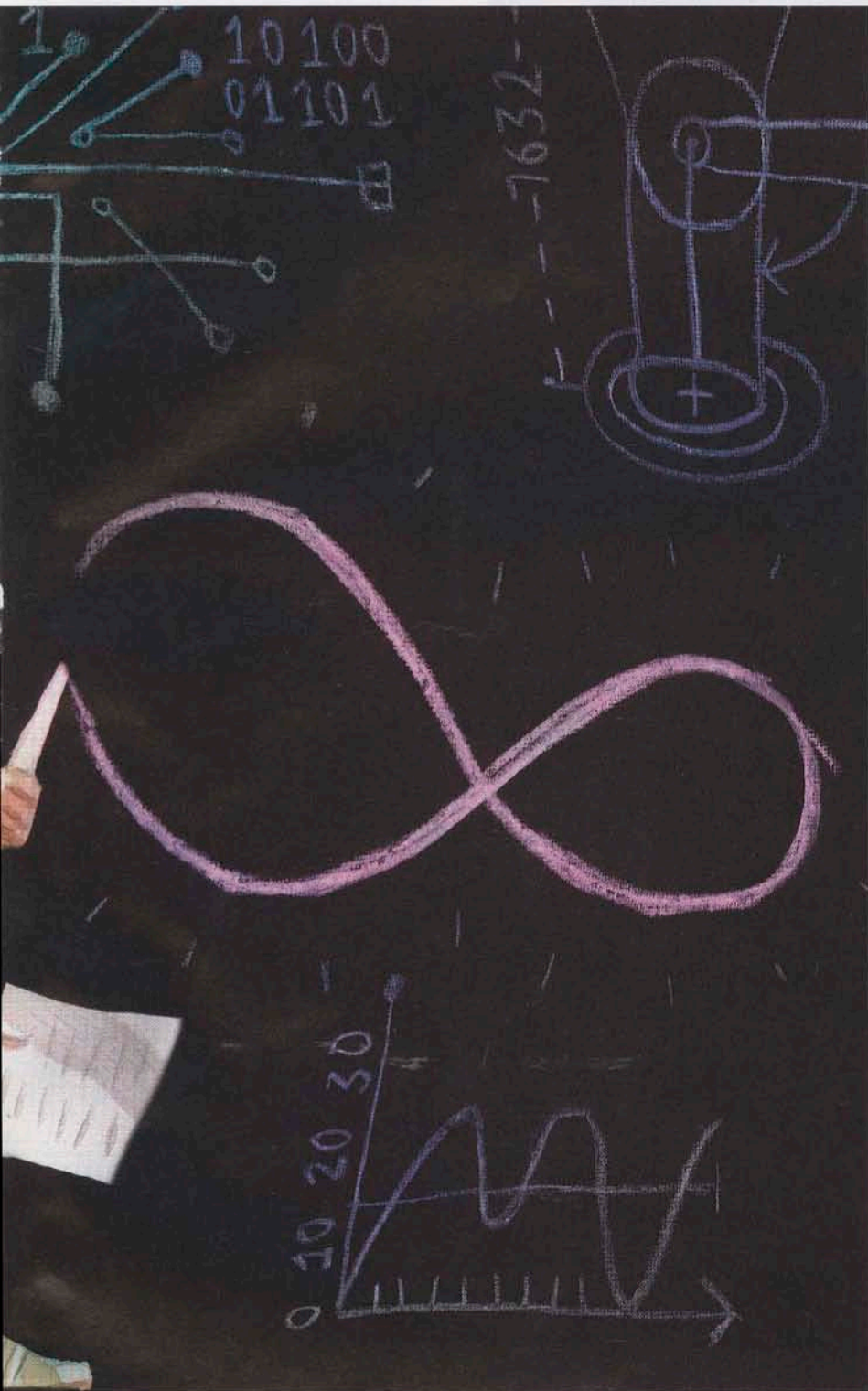
of math has gone down. They just want to know what to do next, not why. The students are concerned about passing the tests, not knowing what they are doing." A fourth-grade teacher from Wisconsin added, "Since the adoption of NCLB, art, music, drama and

physical education classes have been reduced or eliminated to make room for the tested subjects of math, reading, and writing."

I live down the road, so to speak, from these teachers. That universe is in the midst of a sweeping transformation, dramatically influenced by digital technology and placing entirely new demands on members of the workforce. Whence the previous century rewarded technicians and professionals and industrial hands for their specialized skills, the new century demands a broader capacity from each. As the excellent report from the National Center on Education and the Economy, *Tough Choices or Tough Times*, suggests, if an algorithm for a routine job can be identified, chances are an economical digital alternative will take its place. If you learned to take the test but didn't master the inherent understanding, that may be your job.

*Tough Choices or Tough Times* reasserts what we already know: Thinking skills, adaptability and creativity will be the surefire evidence of successful learning. Our teaching and assessment methods should aim for these competencies. Moreover, command of liberal knowledge—writing, speaking, mathematics, science, literature, history and the arts—is no longer just the mark of the well-educated, but is also the essential for workforce excellence. In this new world, the software engineer who masters foreign languages and cultures will have an edge over those who do not; the facilities manager familiar with interior design and architectural software will also have an undeniable advantage.

There can be no doubt that assessment is critical to effective learning. But, just as genuine learning is more than a right or wrong answer on a test, our instructional and assessment methods should draw forth the deeper understandings and competencies that will be our students' passport to this new world of work. Approaching this destination, a virtual moving target, these students will need the very best of navigational skills. **H**



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