

Today's students must be prepared to enter an increasingly competitive world. For this reason, Mississippi is strengthening student assessment, school accreditation and accountability standards in an effort to raise student achievement.

The Mississippi Department of Education and the State Board of Education have begun to make significant changes in the way students are tested. The individual elements of the new assessment system will provide parents and teachers with very detailed and comprehensive information on a student's strengths and weaknesses.

Accreditation levels will now reflect student performance at the school level instead of the district level. This is exciting because all schools will now have the chance to be successful. We believe this new recognition system will result in many more "high performing" schools.

In addition, Senate Bill 2488, passed during the 2000 legislative session, established new accountability standards which will reward schools based on student performance. The bill also provides for an intensive assistance program for schools not meeting accreditation standards. For the first time, all components of a school will be held accountable for student learning, including the students themselves, educators, administrators, superintendents and school board members.

Overview of the New Assessment System

The Education Reform Act of 1982 required an organized system of assessment and accountability in Mississippi schools. The first measures of accountability dealt with students' mastery of basic skills. Through the years, students have been expected to meet increasingly stringent standards, and school districts have been assigned accreditation levels based on a set of process standards and student performance. This system now moves to a new level of accountability.

The new Mississippi Curriculum Content Assessment System is designed to measure what students are actually learning in Mississippi classrooms. The strength of this new system is the emphasis on criterion-referenced tests, which measure a defined curriculum, such as a fifth grade mathematics. Teachers have taught the material, and students know what to expect on the test.

Norm-referenced tests, on the other hand, are designed to measure a broad spectrum of information and to compare students on a national basis. Students will likely be questioned on some material that they have not been taught because the tests are designed to sample curricula in all states, not just in Mississippi. However, norm-referenced tests play a vital role in ensuring that Mississippi students remain competitive with other students throughout the United States. This new system will ensure students have mastered the Mississippi curriculum and are competitive at a national level.

Teachers have been involved in every phase of the development of the criterion-referenced tests. Using the Mississippi Curriculum Frameworks, teachers identified the

areas to be assessed, determined the emphasis on each area, and then developed test blueprints and scoring rubrics. Once test items were located or written to match the test blueprints, teachers examined every item to be sure it matched the curriculum and was free from bias. After tests are administered, teachers will be involved in setting pass/fail scores and in determining the proficiency levels of "advanced," "proficient," "basic," and "minimal."

The teachers involved in the development of the criterion-referenced test were nominated by their district superintendents. They are representative of all areas of the state, all current district accreditation levels, districts of different sizes and the racial and socio-economic composition of the state.

The individual elements of the new assessment system fit together to provide a comprehensive picture of a student's weaknesses and strengths. The three major elements of the system are as follows:

K-2 Diagnostic Assessment

- An informal assessment of reading and mathematics in grades K-2

Grade Level Testing Program

- Published by CTB/McGraw Hill
- A criterion-referenced test in reading, language, and mathematics in grades 2-8
- A writing assessment in grades 4 and 7
- A norm-referenced test in reading, language, and mathematics in grades 5 and 8

Subject Area Testing Program (SATP)

- Published by Harcourt Educational Measurement
- Criterion-referenced, end-of-course tests in Algebra I, Biology I, English II with a writing component, and U.S. History from 1877
- The Functional Literacy Exam (published by National Computer Systems) will remain in place until the SATP tests are required for graduation.