

by Adam L. Beck

No Test Left Behind

Measuring the progress of school districts, test publishers, and transportation providers



A school child is but one of the principals involved in a successful testing experience, and should, arguably, not be the only one subject to close scrutiny and even annual assessment. Equally, but perhaps less visibly involved, are many other parties, including state and local education agencies, test publishers and transportation companies that provide the physical movement of tests to the districts and back to the scoring center.

Each plays a critical role in meeting the provisions of the No Child Left Behind legislation, but it is the transportation provider that is charged with ensuring, at least in a physical sense, that no test be left behind.

For the purpose of this discussion, let's focus on what has not, at least historically, been apparent to the outside viewer or even those directly involved in a successful testing program: the role and ultimate value of those test transportation provider. Indeed, carriers have not been viewed as true principals and partners in this massive process that involves millions of pounds of test booklets re-

quiring strict security and expeditious handling and a clearly documented chain of custody, particularly while in transit between school district and scoring center.

All of that has been largely left up to the whims and fortunes of individual carriers and those can vary wildly in process and scope of control.

Just as the internet has revolutionized the way business is conducted around the world, and caused free enterprise to take a close look in the mirror, NCLB has begun the ramp-up that is begging for the scrapping and re-engineering of the way mandated tests are distributed to districts, secured, picked up, and returned to scoring centers. Yet, state and local agencies are demonstrating resistance to changing old processes and procedures, or in some cases, implementing procedures where none currently exist. They are seemingly content to simply trust that a harried district test coordinator and the transportation carrier will somehow "work it all out" satisfactorily without taking into account all the variables.

Take the not-so-extraordinary case

of one state's recent test distribution: 1,175,623 test booklets; 39,000 boxes and 181 school districts. The carrier had two days to pick them up and get them back to scoring center. Yet the district's test coordinator (a school principal who had been given the duties in addition to her daily workload) did not clearly define a deadline to the schools in her district by which the tests needed to be completed.

The carrier, in the mean time, had been instructed by the test publisher about the pick up deadline, and when they appeared on the designated day, the test coordinator complained bitterly that she wasn't ready, even though she herself played a pivotal role in the missing logistical procedures required for success.

Often, it is simply the sheer volume of pick-up sites, in some states more than 1,000, that create the logistical nightmares that bedevil the process. Couple that with tens of thousands of cartons of test booklets and hundreds of thousands of pounds, a customer base that is largely undereducated in good transportation practices, and the

logistical difficulties expand exponentially. If even one district-level test coordinator becomes ill, makes an error in judgment, simply forgets amid the growing stresses of so complicated a process, or decides to take her child to the dentist without communicating with the carrier, the entire process can sidetrack and grind to a standstill, leaving tempers flaring, fingers pointing in all directions and tests left vulnerable to corruption and disappearance.

Any number of idiosyncratic problems can occur in the educational testing arena, including a huge variety of possible holiday or teacher-meeting closures, inaccessibility to trucks, lack of loading docks, and personnel changes to mention just a few. NCLB will negatively impact the current situation simply by increasing the number of times a child is assessed. It's no secret that teachers and school districts are less than excited about the increased assessments NCLB requires. As one wag derisively put it, NCLB seeks to "prove the elephant is fat by weighing the elephant repeatedly." With districts already pre-disposed to be resistant to further testing, publishers appear to be hesitant to force the issues of transportation infrastructural requirements. Yet, that's just what needs to be done now before NCLB reaches full speed and more errors occur in the currently flawed process.

Test publishers can take a leader-

ship role in realigning the processes that support smooth test distributions and returns by working with transportation providers to educate state and local districts on accepted logistics procedures, almost certainly saving both districts and publishers time, frustration, and money. Specifically, for example, if school districts agreed to allow the test publisher, working in conjunction with the transportation vendor, to establish the date and time window for pick-up of all tests, one of the most frustrating variables in the process would be eliminated. District test coordinators would be able to communicate that specific information to schools that could then schedule and coordinate testing dates in full view of the target deadline. That seemingly simple fix won't happen, however, without first educating the state and local agencies on the importance of standardized transportation procedures on test distributions and pick-ups.

Extending the offer for dialog among assessment's stakeholders and including transportation to act as a consultant in matters relevant to the physical movement and security of tests is the first step to easing the often arduous and hectic weeks of testing that occur annually around the nation. Anecdotal evidence already exists in a handful of states that such a three-way conversation is driving rapid improvements in the industry, setting new standards and

saving districts money. But there is a long road ahead and a highly distracted target audience whose focus is hardly the logistical concerns created by yet more legislation affecting the nation's children.

Let it be said, however, that at the end of the busy testing season, publishers, state and local education agencies and transportation providers have a vested interest in ensuring that no test is ever left behind again.



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