Coming up: Testing and school choice, a redefinED guest series

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For months, one topic seems to have dominated the education debate in Florida: Testing. How should the results be used? How high should the bar be set? Should schools have more flexibility to choose the assessments they use to measure their students?

testing and choiceOne idea, originated in Seminole County but gaining traction elsewhere, calls for measuring public schools using the results of nationally normed tests — similar, proponents have noted, to the testing requirements for the state's tax credit scholarship program. (Step Up For Students, which hosts this blog and employs the author of this post, helps administer the scholarships).

The plan might not be immediately viable, for legal and other reasons, but it raises questions we will explore in a series of guest posts, starting tomorrow: As educational choice programs and customized learning continue to spread, what kind of testing system will allow them to flourish – while also providing enough clarity about how schools perform?

These issues are being raised not just in Florida, but all over the country, as reformers do battle with opt-out activists and partisans debate President Barack Obama's education reform legacy.

At times, they divide the school choice movement. Some favor strong testing requirements to ensure schools do right by children, including the majority of students who remain in public schools and especially the disadvantaged. Others argue test-based accountability needlessly stifles educators' autonomy. Still others stake out a middle ground, arguing for minimal testing, but clear measures of school performance and swift action to shut down the worst schools.

Perhaps other approaches, like competency-based assessment, can cause everyone to look at these questions through a different lens.

We don't pretend to have all the answers. But between now and Thanksgiving, we've invited a range of policy experts and educational practitioners to help us air different perspectives.

Here's the prompt we used to provoke them:

This year the opt-out movement got significant media and political attention in Florida, and made its presence felt in New York and elsewhere. Now some Florida school district leaders are demanding more flexibility in how they measure their schools' performance, and the state's test-based regulatory accountability system is under renewed fire.

At the same time, programs that create new educational options have gained unprecedented national momentum. States around the country are growing private educational choice programs – including some, like education savings accounts, that move beyond basic school choice.

Still, signs abound that standardized testing and regulatory accountability have helped drive positive change. Students in Florida, long a paragon of regulatory accountability, have made some of the biggest academic gains in the nation over the past 15 years, in terms of NAEP scores, AP results and graduations rates. Low-income, black and Hispanic students have made some of the largest gains. And research shows the federal No Child Left Behind testing-and-accountability regime has led to improvements around over the country, especially for disadvantaged groups. Perhaps tellingly, national civil rights groups have been among the strongest advocates for continued standardized testing.

What's driving the backlash against standardized testing in Florida and elsewhere, and the accountability system it supports? Are test-based, regulatory accountability systems at odds with an education system built around customized learning and parental choice, or can the two work hand-in-hand? How should testing evolve to match the learning needs of individual students – and increasingly diverse education providers? As accountability systems adapt to the changing education system, what elements of test-based regulation must be preserved to ensure schools do not shortchange the most disadvantaged students, or other students with unique learning needs?