

February 6, 2009

Dear Principals,

The purpose of this letter is to provide a vision for standardized testing in the Archdiocese.

As you know for many years, the archdiocese recommended that schools administer the Metropolitan Achievement Test and the Otis Lennon Ability Test to students in grades three, five, and seven and the MN Basic Standards Test in Grade 8. Currently, about 20-25% of our schools still administer the MAT 8/OLSAT tests. For the past several years, we have worked to share information with school leaders about how to develop and implement an effective assessment system that ultimately improves the quality of teaching and learning throughout our Catholic Schools. To that end, we as Catholic educators join Rick Stiggins in the belief that as we look to the future we must balance annual, interim and classroom assessment. Only then, will we meet the critically important information needs of all stakeholders and decision-makers. We must build a foundation of assessment literacy at all levels of the system so that we know how to assess accurately and use results productively.

Currently, several of our schools are piloting a test instrument called Learnia. In many ways, the implementation of Learnia has helped our schools shift paradigms from simply conducting an assessment **of** learning to a standardized testing instrument to assess **for** learning. As we bring the pilot to an end, the Learnia Users Group cited many benefits from administering Learnia some of which are:

- Using data to drive instruction
- Identifying students for differentiated instruction and flex grouping
- Sharing specific standards-based achievement data with parents at conferences and jointly developing student action plans

While the benefits were many, there were also some challenges:

- Adapting to on-line testing vs. paper-pencil
- Addressing the technology infrastructure
- Piloting a test while it was being developed
- Meeting the information needs of outside users such as parents and the broader community

As we pondered Stiggins' notion of the users and uses of test data it became clear that one size does not fit all. Students and teachers value criterion-referenced data and have a variety of tools, including standardized tests in which to draw. You as principals value a combination of norm-referenced and criterion-referenced data as you assess and evaluate school program, parent and community needs. Standardized testing meets a variety of system needs for the archdiocese such as upholding the mission and accountability to our stakeholders. Through testing we can uphold a Catholic Identity for education, an identity different from our public schools especially given this economy, yet honoring the partnership we have with public schools at the parish and school levels. We can ensure the common good by minimizing the disparity between the *haves and have-nots*. Standardized test data is used to ensure the quality of education to the Archbishop, Catholic Community Foundation as they grant scholarship money, Catholic Finance as they assess school finances, Development Office as they provide Catholic services as well as all parishioners of the Archdiocese who support us through word, worship and service.

As we move forward, the archdiocese would like to gather comprehensive data from all elementary schools about the achievement levels of all 8th grade students beginning in the fall of 2009. **As such, all archdiocesan grade schools that include 8th grade will be expected to administer the Stanford 10 Achievement Test (SAT 10) in the fall of students' 8th grade year. This follows the precedent of administering the MN Basic Skills Test.**

Please note that the results of these tests will not be used to close Catholic schools. In fact, we believe the achievement levels that we anticipate from across the archdiocese will show people the value of a Catholic education so that more students explore the difference a Catholic education can have on students across our archdiocese.

The Learnia Users Group reviewed the Stanford 10 Achievement Test (SAT10), found it is very similar to MAT 8, and will provide the comparison data that parents often seek and that can be useful for marketing purposes. Some of the features offered by the SAT10 include:

- Norm-referenced, standards-based test
- Online or paper/pencil option
- Optional ability test component (the Otis Lennon) for achievement/ability
- District- wide pricing

In addition, as your schools move forward we encourage you to discern your additional standardized testing uses and users. We recommend that as a minimum, you would administer the SAT 10 in at least three grade levels and preferably you would administer a combination of a norm-referenced test for the outside users and criterion-referenced tests for your inside users.

As you may or may not know, Pearson bought out Harcourt Assessment, the publisher of Learnia. Because of the merger, these two companies have pooled their collective resources and offered the Learnia Users Group and archdiocesan schools a test call Benchmark. Benchmark offers greater flexibility for individual schools to develop criterion-referenced assessments that more closely align with your individual school's curriculum. Benchmark is a criterion-referenced, web-based test similar to Learnia, but offers a broader platform that addresses many of the challenges that were encountered with Learnia. Among the differences/advantages offered by the Benchmark test, include:

- Tests items available for reading, math, science and social studies
- Ability to gather data on individual school standards for program evaluation
- Ability to design a pre and post test based on individual school's written curriculum
- Ability to add other publishers' test to take advantage of computer scoring, thereby freeing up teacher time for data analysis and data-driven instruction
- Disaggregation of test data for special populations- 504, special ed, Title I, ethnicity
- Designed to allow for multiple questions per standard

Given the outstanding reputation of our archdiocesan schools, as well as our desire to prepare 21st century learners, it is imperative that we maintain our **Catholic** Identity. In doing so, we must be proud of the multitude of academic accomplishments that are prevalent throughout the Catholic school system and make sure that our standardized testing continues to improve teaching and learning so that our students receive the highest quality education available. As we move forward, it is our hope that we can do so with a spirit of cooperation whereby the schools across our archdiocese work together with a shared belief that a balanced approach to standardized testing will continue to strengthen our already outstanding Catholic schools.

In the coming weeks you will receive additional information about the SAT10 as well as the Benchmark Test.

Thank you for all that you do on behalf of Catholic Education.

Sincerely,

Mary Kane
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Archdiocese of St. Paul and Minneapolis

