



# The Age of Accountability



Betsy J. Case, Ph.D.

*Keynote address from the 2005 China–U.S. conference on Aligning Assessment with Instruction, Beijing, People’s Republic of China*

September 2005



# The Age of Accountability

## Introduction

With the goal of supporting global education, Pearson Inc. (Pearson) was a sponsoring agency of the 2005 China–U.S. Conference on Educational Assessment held in Beijing. This event marked the second consecutive year of Pearson’s support for this annual conference on education in the U.S. and China. Pearson’s sponsorship provides American educators and researchers with the opportunity to investigate the issues that currently face education and assessment in China, as well as present information on specific topics. This year, the focus and title of the conference was “Aligning Assessment with Instruction.”

China, a country that is frequently cited as the principal competitor to the U.S. in education, has the largest student population in the world—approximately 320 million students at all levels of education (Wang, 2003). Educating a large and diverse student population is a challenge for any country. From the inception of its current government in 1949, China has addressed this challenge through ongoing education reforms. The most recent series of education reforms, which began in 1999, have sought to improve the level of compulsory basic education so that China’s primary and secondary students are adequately prepared for the anticipated transition to the “knowledge-based economy” of the twenty-first century (International Bureau of Education, 2004; World Bank, 1999). Today, China is working to increase the availability of general education with the goal of improving its future generation’s skills in information technology, software, management, and services (Dahlman and Aubert, 2001).

There are distinct similarities between the purpose and implementation of education reforms in China and the education reforms currently underway in the U.S., such as the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001* (NCLB). Both countries are concerned with improving the education of minority and rural students. Educational assessment is recognized as important for assisting and informing instruction and for measuring the impact of reform. In both countries, assessment has become central to holding students and educators accountable to high



standards of achievement in the core subject areas of literacy, mathematics, and science.

The 2005 conference also revealed other priorities and goals shared in the education reforms of China and the U.S. Many of the Chinese presentations concerned the use of assessment and instruction to improve the problem solving, critical thinking, and creativity of their students. The World Bank has cited these skills as central to improving the quality of education available in China (Dahlman and Aubert, 2001; World Bank, 1999). These skills are also of great concern in the U.S. At the 2005 National Conference on Large-Scale Assessment, Ken Kay, president of the Partnership for the 21st Century Skills greatly emphasized critical thinking, problem solving, and creativity as essential to the education of students in the U.S. (Kay, 2005).

Dr. Case, Pearson's director of research and product support, delivered the keynote for the 2005 China–U.S. conference. This paper summarizes her address.

### **The Keynote Address**

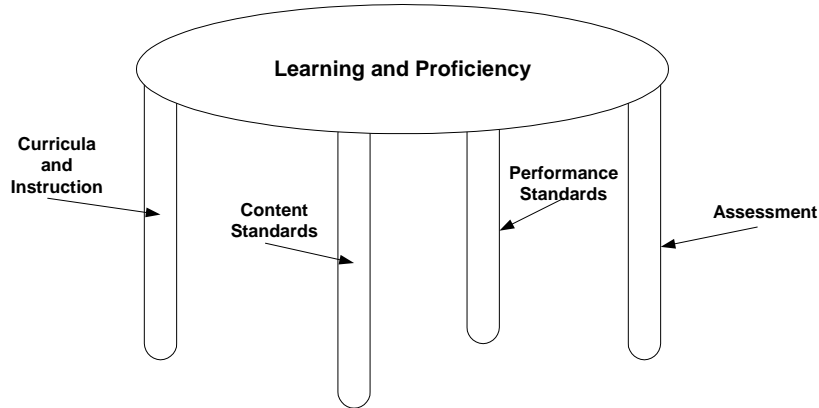
In the U.S., the “Age of Accountability” has arrived, heralded by NCLB. High levels of achievement, as measured by standardized achievement tests, form the cornerstone of the accountability movement in education. Hence, states which accept federal education funding under NCLB must meet three mandates.

1. Develop challenging academic standards.
2. Test students annually using assessments aligned with those standards.
3. Measure whether schools, districts, and states are progressing towards those high standards.

States are expected to develop an aligned educational system of content standards (what students are expected to know and be able to do), performance standards (levels of achievement in a subject area), and a system of mandatory, state-wide assessments. Students are assessed in reading, mathematics, and science in grades 3–8 and once in high school. All students are expected to be proficient in those subject areas by the 2013–2014 school year. If these institutions do not demonstrate appropriate gains in student achievement, significant consequences may be imposed. These consequences include: 1) allowing students to attend other schools which met NCLB requirements in the district, 2) providing supplemental school services (such as tutoring), and 3) implementing corrective action and restructuring of the schools and districts in need of improvement.



Central to achieving this integrated system of instruction and assessment is alignment. It is expected that curricula and instruction will be aligned with content standards, performance standards, and assessments. This system is analogous to a four-legged stool.



If any one leg falls short or is missing, the stool becomes unstable or weak. Alignment refers to the degree to which all aspects of the education system, like the four legs of the stool, are in agreement with each other. Strong alignment ensures that the system of instruction supports student learning and achievement to expectations.

Assessment and instruction are also concerned with guiding and measuring the depth and breadth of knowledge and learning in the classroom. To achieve this goal, teachers must be highly qualified, curricula and instruction must be focused, content standards must have depth and breadth, performance standards must be challenging, and assessments must be aligned with the content standards and instruction. To be used for high-stakes decisions in an education system, assessments must also have high degrees of validity and reliability. Validity is the degree to which an assessment measures what it is designed to measure. Reliability refers to the consistency of the results obtained.

The conference's three strands explore topics related to these issues, such as

1. using results to inform instruction,
2. technical adequacy and fairness, and
3. developing aligned assessments.

This conference presents opportunities for us to learn from one another, to cultivate potential partners, and to learn more about the similarities and



differences between our respective countries' approaches to aligning assessment and instruction. Some of the similarities that are evident between the current education systems and reforms of both countries include the following:

- the involvement of both countries in working to meet their respective national reform initiatives;
- the support for the alignment of assessments and instruction;
- the ongoing reform effort to improve learning;
- the emphasis on scientifically-based or research-based strategies for developing new approaches to assessment and learning;
- the importance of training teachers to administer tests and use the results in instruction;
- the presence of gaps between the resources available to rural and urban areas, such as access to computers and highly trained teachers;
- the balance that must be maintained between the needs of students, teachers, principals, policy-makers, and government decision-makers; and
- the use of assessment results to reshape instruction and learning.

Some major differences between the countries are especially notable.

- Chinese assessments focus on the whole child, including academic growth, student learning styles, emotional health, values, fine arts and confidence. Accountability assessments in the United States focus on the academic areas of reading, writing, mathematics, and science.
- In China, the unit of analysis is the child. In the U.S., the unit of analysis frequently is the school.
- China does not have formal alignment methodologies. The U.S. has three major formal alignment methodologies, and a state is required to use one of them when developing a standards-based accountability assessment.
- In China, two-thirds of teachers are under 40 years of age. In the U.S., two thirds of the teachers are over 40 years of age.



- China uses both formative and summative assessments. The U.S. relies primarily on summative assessments.
- Finally, China uses a thoughtful, comprehensive approach in which
  - the child evaluates self,
  - the teacher evaluates the child, and
  - the teacher evaluates self.

The primary reason for convening this conference is for its participants to engage in active dialogue and learning. The delegates from both countries can and should learn from each other. To the Chinese participants, I humbly hope you find that the presentations from the U.S. delegates are interesting and useful to you. Both countries should celebrate their focus on improving assessment and learning. Our children are our future world leaders. By focusing on the skills and knowledge that students must achieve to be successful and by designing high-quality, aligned assessments that support instruction, we can obtain higher standards and a better education for our students. For any country—for the entire world—having these goals for future generations is both desirable and commendable. This conference celebrates both countries’ approaches to educational assessment and encourages further discussion, learning, and global interactions.

## References

- Dahlman, C. J. & Aubert, J. (2001). *China and the knowledge economy: Seizing the 21st century*. Washington, DC: The World Bank.
- Kay, K. (2005). *Aligning 21<sup>st</sup> century skills and assessments; Preparing the next generation of citizens and workers*. Program conducted at the Council of Chief State School Officers 35<sup>th</sup> Annual National Conference on Large-Scale Assessment, San Antonio, TX.
- International Bureau of Education. (2004). *Educational development in China*. Geneva, Switzerland: UNESCO. Retrieved from [http://www.ibe.unesco.org/International/ICE47/English/Natreps/reports/china\\_ocr.pdf](http://www.ibe.unesco.org/International/ICE47/English/Natreps/reports/china_ocr.pdf) on September 15, 2005.
- Wang, X. (2003). *Education in China since 1976*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company.
- World Bank. (1999). *Strategic goals for Chinese education in the 21st century*. Washington, DC: Author. Retrieved from [http://www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2000/02/28/000094946\\_00021405315280/Rendered/PDF/multi\\_page.pdf](http://www-wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2000/02/28/000094946_00021405315280/Rendered/PDF/multi_page.pdf) on September 15, 2005.

Additional copies of this document and related documents are available from:

Pearson Inc.  
19500 Bulverde Road  
San Antonio, TX 78259  
1-800-211-8378  
1-877-576-1816 (fax)  
<http://www.pearsonassess.com>