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AFT REPORT: MONTANA'S TESTS BASED ON WEAK CONTENT STANDARDS IN MOST GRADES

BOSTON— Montana needs to improve its reading, math, and elementary science standards that are the basis of the state tests, according to a report released today by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT).

The findings are included in “Smart Testing: Let’s Get It Right: How Assessment-Savvy Have States Become Since NCLB?”, a state-by-state report that concluded that States have made progress in the development of clear grade-by-grade standards but most have failed to align their math, reading and science high-stakes tests to a strong set of content standards, which can give the public an unfair and inaccurate impression of how students, schools and teachers are performing.

The good news for Montana is that the middle and high school level science standards are strong. However, the bad news is that the grade 4, 8, and high school level reading tests are based on weak standards. There are also no reading or math standards for grades 3, 5, 6, or 7. In addition, there are no test documents to indicate which of the science standards will be tested by the state. Finally, the reading, math, and elementary science standards are all weak.

The report comes 11 years after AFT issued its first “Making Standards Matter” report on the rigor of each state’s core academic standards and five years after the enactment of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandates. “Smart Testing” examines the quality of the 50 states’ and Washington, D.C.’s content standards for reading, math and science. The report also does an analysis to determine whether state tests for those subjects are aligned with strong—clear and grade-specific—content standards.

The NCLB law’s requirement to develop grade-by-grade content standards and assessments to has placed enormous pressure on states. While most states have met the challenge of developing these content standards, many are struggling to align their tests with the standards. “Simply put, in too many cases, testing unaligned to strong standards is driving many accountability systems. The result: those state’s systems are not ‘smart’ enough to bear the weight of the accountability functions they are asked to serve,” the report says.

The study shows that 11 states—California, Indiana, Louisiana, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, Ohio, Tennessee, Virginia, Washington and West Virginia—lead the nation with systems that have strong content standards and tests that are aligned to the content standards in all grades.

The “Smart Testing” report also found the following concerning standards:

- States’ weakest content standards are in reading. A significant problem is that many states simply repeat reading standards from grade to grade, with 15 states repeating the same standards in three or more grades.
- States’ strongest standards are in science.
- All but six states (Colorado, Illinois, Montana, Nebraska, Pennsylvania and Wisconsin) have grade-by-grade content standards in reading and math, as required by NCLB.
- More than one-third of states have strong content standards in every grade and subject. Eighteen states meet AFT’s criteria for strong content standards in all assessed grades and subjects.

“Smart Testing” found the following concerning alignment:

- Many states continue to struggle in aligning tests with strong content standards. Just over 20 percent of states clearly document how their tests are aligned in all grades and subjects reported under NCLB.
- Fifty-two percent of the state-administered tests are aligned to strong content standards.

Based on these findings, the AFT made the following recommendations for improving state testing:

- States with weak reading standards need to eliminate repetitious statements and write clearer and more specific content standards for all grade levels.
- States that do not have grade-by-grade or course-specific standards need to do so to improve the quality of their high schools.
- State departments of education need additional funding so that they can develop quality assessment systems.
- State departments should coordinate the work of state assessment and curriculum divisions within state departments of education so that the materials inform and complement each other rather than compete with or contradict each other.
- States should provide professional development around the assessments for teachers and administrators.
- States should post information about standards and tests—and how they align—on Web sites and keep them current.

For a copy of the full report and state-by-state “Smart Testing” results, visit www.aft.org/presscenter/releases/2006/smarttesting/index.htm.

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The AFT represents 1.3 million pre-K through 12th-grade teachers; paraprofessionals and other school-related personnel; higher education faculty and professional staff; nurses and healthcare workers; and federal, state and local government employees.