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Russia

A Review of End-of-Secondary-School Examination Systems in Russia

Topic of Research and Countries Visited

This study's goal was to review and compare examination systems currently in use in Russia at the conclusion of the secondary general education school (i.e., in eleventh grade). These systems are: (1) traditional examinations for the maturity certificate (mandated, free of charge); (2) the Centralized Testing system (voluntary, for-fee); and (3) the Unified State Examination (experimental, mandated in some regions, free of charge). To complete this research I visited Russia in May-June 2005. My objective for this trip was to gather information about the following aspects of the examinations: (a) purposes, (b) focus and content, (c) concepts and techniques, (d) standardization procedures, (e) use of results, and (f) effectiveness, cost, and feasibility.

Relevance and Contribution to Field

Since the late 1980's the educational system in Russia has been undergoing a radical transformation. Many believe that this transformation has caused a significant deterioration in the quality of general education, and has resulted in greater differences in educational attainment across schools and regions. As a result, a movement to create an independent centralized system of objective examinations was launched. Its goals were to establish and protect national standards and to end widespread corruption in the admission system. Introduction of a standardized, objective national examination constitutes an unprecedented overhaul of the traditional system of measuring student achievement in Russia. As Russia seeks ways to bring about educational change and, in particular, to raise school achievement, it is important to reveal the strengths and weaknesses of Russia's competing examination systems.

This study looked closely at Russia's end-of-secondary-school examination systems, comparing and contrasting their purposes, means of delivery, and feasibility. Its findings have important implications for educators and policy makers in Russia, as well as in the United States. It suggests directions for improvements to the examination systems in Russia, while serving as an informational resource for U.S. educators and policy makers

Summary of Approach and Research Methodology

This research summarized information drawn from three basic types of resources: (1) official Web sites of relevant organizations in Russia; (2) reports, analyses, and reviews published in pedagogical literature and in the Russian media; and (3) informal interviews with staff at the Federal Testing Center (FTC) and the Federal Institute of Pedagogical Measurement (FIPM), and with officials at the Federal Service for Supervision of Education and Science.

Websites of organizations like the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation (MESRF), Unified State Examination Information Portal, and the FTC report on issues associated with the examination systems and provide pertinent data from actual examinations. A large volume of reviews and analyses of the Unified State Examination (USE) and Centralized

Testing (CT) have been published in Russian pedagogical literature, and the media have also been actively participating in the public discussion on this issue. However, this study would not be complete without direct communication with colleagues and officials in charge of the secondary school examinations in Russia.

FIPM has been actively involved in the development of the USE, and the FTC has been involved in the development and administration of both the CT and USE. Staff at these organizations provided valuable materials for this study and acted as resources to clarify published information. The Federal Service for Supervision of Education and Science is an agency subordinate to the MESRF. This agency is in charge of regulating and organizing the traditional examinations and the USE.

Summary of Research Findings and Preliminary Conclusions

Recent developments in Russian education have resulted in three competing end-of-secondary school examination systems. The first of them was inherited from the Soviet period when high school graduates were required to pass maturity certificate examinations. These traditional examinations were conducted in students' schools by their own teachers, guided by regulations issued at federal and regional levels. In the late 1980's, the CT system was introduced by pioneers of objective testing in Russia. It is a system of subject-specific standardized tests offered to high school graduates for a fee, much like the ACT and SAT in the United States. Finally, the USE was initiated in the late 1990's by high-level federal government officials as an "equal-opportunity," mandated free examination system to serve both as an end-of-high-school examination and as a national admission examination to postsecondary institutions. Although these three examination systems presently coexist in Russia, not all of them may survive by the end of this decade. It remains to be seen whether the traditional examinations will be abandoned in favor of the USE, and whether the USE will replace the CT, as proponents of the USE originally planned.

The new examination systems are still evolving: Even the purposes and priorities of the USE continue to change, sometimes dramatically. Originally, it was to serve as a dual-purpose examination: a secondary school exit examination and an entrance-to-postsecondary-institution examination. Recent statements by officials of the MESRF contradict this goal by indicating that the examination may not be required for students who do not intend to pursue higher education. Thus, an important function of the examination, monitoring secondary school achievement, may be eliminated. At the other end of the spectrum, there are calls to broaden the scope of the USE by testing students in earlier grades, during the transition from elementary school to middle school, and from middle school to high school.

The transition to the national examination is viewed skeptically by students, parents, and educators. Much of the critique of the USE published in the media is aimed at the structure and quality of test materials. Numerous suggestions for improvements have been made, but in my opinion, measurement specialists involved in the USE will not be able to create a well-constructed examination that is acceptable to the public until educational policymakers clearly define its goals.

Many complaints have been voiced in the media about the strains the USE is putting on the organizers and the examinees. While the traditional examinations did not require additional resources because they were part of teachers' and administrators' work responsibilities, the USE has proved to be a costly innovation. It appears, however, that the FTC's operations are run more efficiently.

Many in Russia believe that a comprehensive review of the four-year experiment is long overdue: The USE's purposes, costs, goals, and the progress towards meeting these goals should be evaluated by a panel of independent experts. However, it appears that disappointment has sunk in: Since major changes were made in the government in the spring of 2004, when many of the MESRF officials who were enthusiastic about the USE were replaced, the national examination has been plagued by budget problems and threats of downscaling. Recent reports in the media about delays in funding the 2005 USE administration have cast further doubts on the future of the USE. In late August, 2005, the Minister of the MESRF Andrei Fursenko announced that he would consult regional educational authorities in September about the future of the USE. It is likely that the examinations will undergo a major revision.

The future of the CT is also unclear. On one hand, it is undermined by attempts to eliminate competitors to the USE through legislation that limits uses of the CT's results. Because of this, in 2005 the number of students taking the CT tests declined substantially. On the other hand, only the FTC has the infrastructure, technology, and the resources that are necessary to organize the USE. In fact, with delays in government funding of the USE, the FTC has frequently used its own funds, obtained from conducting the CT, to ensure timely delivery of the USE.

It appears that the traditional examinations are to stay. Although their subjectivity brought about attempts to introduce other, more objective, end-of-secondary-school examination systems, their cost-effectiveness and organizational ease, tested on generations of students, will likely ensure their continuing use, even if with adjustments.

Suggestions for future research agendas in the field for the scholarly community

Because the processes reviewed in this study have not been finalized, and the outcomes are still uncertain, my primary suggestion is to continue monitoring the situation and gathering data. Another suggestion is to take a close look at the USE and CT test results. A large volume of data for various subject areas, regions, and student populations have been collected over the years. These data could be analyzed to answer numerous research questions about differences among curricula and teaching methods, regions and student populations, as well as test items types and test structures.

Recommendations for the US Policy Community

US policymakers need to take note of educational developments in Russia and support the emergence of an independent, objective educational testing system in Russia. America's historic traditions of educational measurement are universally accepted, and Russia's educators are eager to learn from our experiences. I believe that it is in US interests to assist Russia in this transition. The most pressing need is to prepare more educational measurement specialists. International Education non-governmental organizations could serve as liaisons to help prepare Russian specialists at US universities. The US educational measurement community could help train Russian teachers and school administrators to use objective tests and their results appropriately. Finally, the experience of US testing organizations in conducting large-scale standardized examinations would be of enormous value to the developers of national examinations in Russia. US policymakers could assist in making this experience available to them by creating opportunities for internships at American testing companies and for research exchange programs between Russian and American testing organizations.