

# The Development of Degrees of Reading Power® (DRP®) Tests

## A Brief History of a Successful Collaboration

Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) tests are the product of a discussion that began nearly 40 years ago. In the early 1970s, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) sought to develop better tests of student performance, genuine criterion-referenced tests that would reflect and inform sound instructional practices and would also be useful in the state accountability system. The Executive Deputy Commissioner of NYSED, Gordon M. Ambach, met with Bertram L. Koslin, Vice President for Research at Riverside Research Institute at the time, to discuss the need to develop tests that would serve as “effectiveness measures” in education. Such tests would have to measure:

- *Student growth or progress over relevant time periods, such as a school year.*
- *Change in student performance relative to “real world” standards and expectations.*
- *The impact of variation in educational resources, instructional programs, or management processes on student achievement.*

As an outgrowth of this discussion, a technical report entitled *Design Concepts for an Effectiveness Measure in Reading* was published in 1973. The report addressed the feasibility of developing an effectiveness measure in reading and showed how value judgments concerning the difficulty of text students ought to be able to comprehend could be transformed into scores on a test designed to assess student ability to comprehend such text.

**DESIGN CONCEPTS FOR AN EFFECTIVENESS MEASURE IN READING** became the genesis in 1976 for the first of four grants from the Carnegie Corporation to the Regents Research Fund to support investigation into the development of the first effectiveness measure in education. The principal architects of the report, Drs. Bertram L. Koslin and Sandra Koslin, formed Touchstone Applied Science Associates (TASA), Inc. to carry out this research and development effort on behalf of the Board of Regents. Advisory groups of New York educators and administrators, national panels of reading experts and psychometricians, NYSED’s Bureau of Reading Education and Division of Educational Testing, and TASA worked together for three years. Finally, after the resolution of what had been considered intractable technical problems in assessment, the first operational forms of DRP tests were ready for administration.

New York had already started a competency testing program in 1974. The reading tests that were part of that program attempted to relate student competence to basic adult tasks; however, those tests came under heavy attack in 1976. In 1977, after Executive Deputy Commissioner Ambach became Commissioner, he and the Board of Regents decided to adopt DRP tests as the basis for the Regents Competency Test (RCT) in reading and to replace existing Pupil Evaluation Program (PEP) tests. Extensive discussions were held throughout the state during which educators and the public were invited to review the tests and to comment on the proposed standards of student performance that had been set.

To support TASA and NYSED in their effort to incorporate DRP tests into the state testing programs, the College Board joined forces with them in 1979. For the next ten years, the College Board provided continuity of funding and additional staff resources in exchange for the right to market DRP tests to the educational community. Thus, TASA was able to focus on remaining technical issues such as the preparation of multiple DRP test forms, the publication of test manuals, the establishment of norms, and the development of test scoring and reporting software.

In 1979, the Commissioner and Board of Regents began using Degrees of Reading Power tests in the state's Regents Competency Testing (RCT) program. Over the next few years, DRP tests also became part of the Preliminary Competency Testing (PCT) program administered in grades 8 and 9, and the Pupil Evaluation Program (PEP) tests administered in grades 3 and 6. The use of DRP tests in this configuration permitted the assessment of student growth in reading across grades 3 through 12. DRP test use continues today for the RCT-Reading as a "safety net" for students with disabilities.

Multiple standards of performance, rather than just a minimum competency standard, were set and recognized by the Board of Regents. For each of the score bands defined by these multiple standards, descriptions of the instructional programs in reading comprehension best suited to meet the needs of the students were provided. In addition, all schools (including high schools) were directed to focus additional resources on the teaching of reading for those students who were identified as having problems in reading. *For the first time, students with special instructional needs could be identified early in their school careers, long before they had to take the Regents Competency Test for graduation. Thus, the aim of the testing program in reading was to target instruction rather than to fail students.*

By recognizing that reading is the process of constructing meaning from text and by implementing DRP tests, the Commissioner and Board of Regents were clearly defining a mission for schools in New York. Prose reading, rather than the acquisition of discrete skills of reading, was required and DRP test scores would improve if, and only if, student ability to comprehend text increased. These actions by the Commissioner and the Board of Regents were both innovative and courageous in the late 1970s.

The issues DRP tests were designed to address, as well as the issues that were addressed by the actions of the Commissioner and Board of Regents, are just as salient today as they were in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Indeed, current interest in standards and accountability has provided an opportunity for DRP tests to step forward as an ideal measure for both. In school districts across the country, DRP tests are used as critical measures for informing classroom instruction as well as for supporting school accountability. And the state of Connecticut has included DRP tests as part of its mandatory state testing program for 30 years now, including the use of DRP tests as a key component of its No Child Left Behind (NCLB) testing program. Moreover, several other states mandated use of DRP tests as a central component of their approach to assessment for Reading First. The integration of secure DRP tests, administered as part of a state testing program, coupled with school or district level use of DRP tests, provides a coherent, consistent, and cost-effective way for schools to achieve their objectives for students in reading. Throughout the country, in fact, DRP tests are the measure of choice for those school systems that have put into place instructional programs in reading that focus on the acquisition of the foundational skills necessary to construct meaning from text.

The development of DRP tests is a model of successful collaboration:

- *An agency of state government identified a need;*
- *A research and development firm proposed a solution;*
- *A philanthropic foundation provided the support for research and development; and*
- *A non-profit membership organization provided the programmatic support for operations.*

Given the current interest in setting educational goals and measuring student progress, the collaboration that gave rise to DRP tests was clearly ahead of its time. Had this initiative not taken place, however, we might be years behind.

Note: In March 2007, Touchstone Applied Science Associates (TASA) changed its corporate name to Questar Assessment, Inc. ([www.Questarai.com](http://www.Questarai.com)). Today, Questar continues to proudly support development efforts to ensure that its Degrees of Reading Power (DRP) program remains a valuable educational tool well into the twenty-first century.