

# CNMI SCORES BIG

## Community Helps Create Standards, Assessments

By Don Burger

In the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), community involvement has been a key factor in meeting goals set in the public school system (PSS) strategic plan. The community not only helped shape standards and assessments, but solved a sticky problem by supplying the talent to reliably score tests that provide a more sensitive measure of student achievement.

The new standards-based assessments are combinations of student-constructed response, short answer, student-selected response, and multiple-choice item formats. Instead of reducing individual scores to an average, these assessments supply separate ratings for each standard/benchmark. The combined ratings form a profile, making it possible to assess not only students' recall (something bubble tests do well), but higher-level thinking skills that involve reasoning and processing. Assessment ratings and profiles help teachers identify students' instructional needs and help administrators set goals for professional development.

While the new assessments supply more information, they generate responses that can't be scored electronically. Sending assessments off-island for scoring proved too costly. To create an affordable alternative, PSS Associate Commissioner for Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment Rita Sablan turned to the community for help. Justo Quitaguay located a site for the scoring centers and recruited qualified community members. Teachers volunteered their services as well. With community members working during the day and teachers in the evening, the scoring process for the CNMI First-Grade Reading Diagnostic Assessment took only a few days. Community assistance not only proved less expensive, but allowed for a faster turnaround time, with scoring in May and school- and entity-wide results available in June. Two more community scoring centers are planned for spring 2003, when the standards-based writing and mathematics assessments will be administered.



▷ Community scoring centers are a low-cost way of scoring complex assessments.

These tests are part of an overall accountability system outlined in the CNMI PSS Strategic Plan. The objective was to create standards-based assessment instruments that would meet criteria for federal funding established by the *No Child Left Behind* and Reading First initiatives. To help meet this objective, PSS contracted PREL's Pacific Assessment Systems and Services program (PASS) to supply technical support for the teachers and curriculum specialists who would create the assessments. The test development process takes a year, with teachers and curriculum specialists serving as the content design team. Working with PASS, the design teams developed the reading assessments in 2001 and the writing and math assessments in 2002. Standards-based science and social studies assessments will be developed in 2003.

Community participation is important to the assessment development process as well. After the design teams draft the assessments, community members take part in the validity and bias review. Representatives from parent/teacher associations, business, government, and higher education fill

out feedback forms, and their comments inform the process as the design teams create their first pilot assessments. After the pilot is administered to about 100 students per grade level, the design teams and PASS staff work together to create a scoring manual and to set performance standards.

Community involvement has been key to CNMI's success in meeting PSS Strategic Plan goals. Participation in developing the instruments moved teachers towards ownership of the whole assessment process, as well as of overall standards and accountability. Community assistance in setting standards and in reviewing and scoring assessments helped increase and improve communications between the schools and the communities of which they are a part. CNMI's progress shows what can be done when educators and community members work together toward a common goal.

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