

From the Tutor: Four Things to Look at OTHER Than Your Child's Test Scores

Standardized testing has been a mainstay of education since the 1960's, and it seems to be here to stay. But SHOULD it? CAN a standardized test really tell you how well your child is learning? Could you do without these tests completely? This article describes some alternatives to business as usual.

One argument in favor of standardized tests is that there *is* no alternative; that there is no other way of measuring student achievement or assuring that every student has equal access to a good education. Detractors claim that the only thing standardized tests do is make education into a 'sport' with winners and losers. Another point of view suggests that standardized testing is popular only because of the convenience of storing the results in a database and performing statistical analysis on them and not because it is actually useful in evaluating student achievement.

Bush's *No Child Left Behind Act* based EVERYTHING from school funding to teacher retention on the results of students' test scores, while Obama's *Blueprint for Reform* looks for other kinds of assessments of achievement that will label fewer schools as 'failing'.

Many experienced teachers don't put much faith in standardized tests. Instead, they get to know their students and work with them. They will tell you that a good teacher knows, even before exams, how well a student is grasping the subject. How reliable is the teacher's opinion? Dare we assume that some test can do better?

Parents are also uncertain about the validity of standardized test results. A 1999 Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup poll showed that only 27% of parents believed standardized test scores were the best measure of student learning. The measure they chose as the best was a portfolio containing samples of the student's work [33% of the votes]. Letter grades and teacher-written observations split the remaining votes.

Despite all of this uncertainty standardized tests will continue to be important, at least for the foreseeable future of public education, but it is important to realize that there are valid alternatives available. Here are other types of assessments you should be looking at when you evaluate your child's progress:

- Written descriptions of your child's performance from the teacher. A short letter along with, or even in place of, a grade report can tell you much about your child's strengths and growth.
- Teacher conference[s]. Regular sit-down time with the teacher allows you both to ask questions and discuss both learning and plans.
- Performance tasks. In these a child can actually do something: do an experiment and give the results, write a story, create a map assuming history had developed differently.
- A portfolio of work done during the period in each subject. Portfolios can show better than letter grades what students have accomplished and which subjects need extra support. Portfolios also allow a student at any level to 'step back' and take pride in what they have learned and the work they've done.

In addition, standardized tests can be redesigned to make them more useful and less damaging to children. Wherever possible they should:



1. Be untimed or have untimed options available to students who struggle with time stress.
2. Consist of free-answer rather than multiple choice questions.
3. Be standards-referenced, not norm-referenced. This simply means that each student's results are compared to what was taught and what answers were expected, not to the results of other students.
4. Be given infrequently. They should be used only once or twice a year to obtain basic, limited information
5. Constitute only one, small part of the overall evaluation process.

When they are administered to hundreds or thousands of students, standardized tests, and the statistics derived from their results, can give useful information about schools, districts and programs, but one test administered to one student is of very limited value. Unfortunately, as things stand today the stakes are very high for every student who takes these tests. As parents we need to keep that in perspective and urge teachers and schools to do the same.

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