

Arguments Against the Use of Standardized Testing

There's no point in hoping that standardized testing will go away. However, being aware of the potential problems can help students, parents and teachers mitigate the worst effects. This article discusses the ways testing can hurt more than help.

Planned testing drives curriculum taught in schools. The test designers, not teachers and schools, decide what will be taught in the classroom when test results are the measure of student and teacher performance. Few people think that is a good thing, since it is the teachers that have the experience and the certification it takes to plan curriculum for a specific class.

"Teaching to the test" too often means that practicing test-taking skills supplants meaningful learning. Teachers are not wrong to prepare students for testing, since it is a skill they will need repeatedly in their careers. On the other hand, the cost of missed learning in the individual subject areas is thought by many to be much too high.

Most standardized tests are multiple choice. Choose-right-or-wrong thinking narrows learning to only the objective. Higher-level thinking that involves deeper analysis of a topic is not tested. This in turn leads to this critically-important skill being given much less emphasis in the school curriculum than it deserves.

Many school systems hold their schools accountable when test scores do not continually improve. Test scores are often used to determine funding and salary increases. The focus of motivation of teachers is narrowed to raising scores. That pressure can lead to abuses in test administration and score reporting.

High-stakes standardized testing can have negative emotional effects on both students and their teachers. Results below expectations can cause a collapse of self-confidence. Disillusionment and loss of motivation follow close behind. This ultimately is that self-fulfilling prophecy of failure. Sadly, the effect is as true for teachers as for students when punishment quickly follows if test scores are low.

Most standardized tests are norm-referenced. Simply put, student scores are rated against the scores of other students, NOT against expected knowledge of the subject matter. The reported score represents NOT how many of the questions were answered correctly, but how many other students' scores were better or worse. This means that only a few students can earn high level scores. Regardless of how well they did, a designated percentage of students will be reported as BELOW 'norm' performance. Learning is turned into a 'sport' with winners and losers.

Scores are reported using complicated statistics. Parents can have a problem understanding the report or the test itself. Without that understanding parents can do very little to be involved in their child's preparation.



Standardized testing becomes a problem when the test itself is not universally fair.

Students with disabilities, test anxiety, and language or cultural differences are all at an immediate disadvantage. Those students who take tests often have a decided advantage over students who seldom face this kind of test. The evidence for test bias can be found in the results. African-American students usually score 200 points lower on the SAT than European-American students. The "35-point gender gap" between girls and boys on the math section of the SAT has long been known. Inequities such as these call the whole idea that testing can BE standardized into question.

Most damning of all, standardized tests are more or less worthless. No test given on a single day can ever measure anything meaningful about a student. The time used for test-taking could be better used for something else, such as actual learning.

Clearly I am not a proponent of any more standardized testing than absolutely necessary. As a teacher and a parent, however, I know I need to arm my students with the skills to do well, but never, no NEVER, at the expense of time to read, discuss, question or create.

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