

From the SAT Expert: Why so MUCH Standardized Testing?

These days students take so many standardized tests. Beginning of the year. End of the year. Qualifying. Placement. Quarterly Progress. Someone must think them important enough to justify the considerable cost of creating and scoring them and the time it takes to administer them. This article looks at some of the advantages these tests provide.

The first advantage is that the tests are, in fact, standard. Each student in each class in each school that uses the test takes the SAME test under the same conditions. This better assures fairness in the measure of a student's mastery of specific material.

Another advantage is that grading is done automatically to eliminate any bias from a scorer. This objectivity should mean that there are no differences between tests scored by one scorer versus another. In point of fact, most standardized test questions are multiple choice or true/false. These types of questions are completely objective and can be scored digitally. This effectively eliminates any chance of scoring bias.

Two more advantages of standardization are validity and reliability. Reliability simply means that the test will give the same results when administered repeatedly. Validity, on the other hand, refers to how well test scores actually measure how well the student knows the material, or, how well does the score on the test in question 'agree' with other kinds of evaluations of the same material, such as free responses or skills demonstration. These two measures also refer to 'fairness'; the assumption is that they are better for comparison than the many different tests created by individual teachers.

Emphasis on testing for admission to elite schools may be justified in the same way. Tests are helpful when comparing students from across the nation or across the world. Grades on a school transcript must also be considered, of course, but they are assigned by individual teachers. They must be compared despite the differences among schools in terms of educational culture, the differing levels of a given teacher's classes, as well as differences in teaching style, techniques, and grading.

Standardized tests are thought to predict how well students will do in the schools to which they're applying. Studies have shown that standardized tests predict success more accurately than subjective assessments, such as interviews, which, in fact, have been shown to be no better than tossing a coin in predicting a student's success at a particular school. It is also true that testing predicts success less well than do other aspects of a student's application, such as work or intern experiences. Those things are impossible to quantify, however, and so can't replace testing entirely.

Looking at it another way, test scores are used not to evaluate individual students, but rather to measure teachers, programs and schools. Their value for this purpose comes from aggregation, which provides a more accurate assessment of a group's skills and knowledge. One student's score may or may not indicate much, but scores from a group



can very accurately measure the achievement of the group as a whole. The percentage of assessment error goes down when a large number of scores are considered.

I know that many teachers fight the idea of testing being used to evaluate them, but I can say that I have always seen myself in those results. Things that I love and teach well my students know, other topics not so much.

For good or ill, standardized tests are with us virtually permanently. It is important that we specifically prepare our students to deal with them.

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