

High-Stakes Testing: Is It Fair to Students?

Pick up a newspaper and you're likely to see an article about education standards, accountability, and testing. You may even come across a story about high-stakes testing, meaning standardized tests that are tied to major consequences, such as passing a grade or graduating from high school. With a national spotlight shining on education, two approaches to school reform have emerged hand-in-hand: the development of more rigorous standards and the regular assessments of those standards.

As standards-based education reform gains momentum, more states are putting into place high-stakes testing programs. Currently, half of the states either have in place or are in the process of implementing the requirement that high school seniors pass a test in order to graduate. By 2003, seven states will require students to pass a test in order to advance to the next grade. Some states make decisions about funding for individual schools, teachers' and principals' salaries, and even accreditation of schools based on test scores.

With a growing number of states administering high-stakes testing, more debates emerge about whether tests match the prescribed standards, whether "teaching to the test" is desirable, and whether high-stakes test penalize disadvantaged students. Receiving the most attention, though, is the question that goes to the heart of the issue: Is it fair to students when major education decisions are made based on the results of a single test?

Multiple measures

John Merrow, host and executive producer of *The Merrow Report* on NPR and PBS, said high-stakes testing is a practice with dubious merit because standardized tests serve as a very limited measuring device. Merrow is in good company with most testing experts who maintain that a standardized test is only an estimate of a student's mastery at a particular time. When taking a standardized test a second time, a student may have only 30-50 percent chance of scoring within five points of his or her initial score, according to the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing. As a result, a score change of as many as 10 points may be completely attributable to the test. Other factors that may influence a test score include whether the child receives clear directions, follows the directions carefully, takes the test seriously, and is comfortable taking tests.

In the world outside of K-12 education, major decisions are routinely based on more than one type of assessment, explained Merrow, author of the just-published *Choosing Excellence: "Good Enough" Schools Are Not Good Enough*. A medical doctor, he said, wouldn't operate on a patient based on the results of a single test. Instead, the doctor would take a second measurement and look for other indicators. Similarly, college admissions offices never base their decisions solely on test scores: "You don't get into Harvard because you got 1600 on your SAT. They use multiple measures," explained Merrow. "Yet we're willing to take a single measure and say this determines whether a student goes on to the 8th grade or graduates from high school."

As standards are established, assessments, of course, are needed to track improvements for individual students and schools. So what are the alternatives to high-stakes, multiple choice tests? In recent years, a number of alternative, broad-based assessment strategies have been developed, some of which emphasize familiar pedagogical methods. Peter Sacks, author of *Standardized Minds: The High Price of America's Testing Culture and What We Can Do About It*, recommends measuring student achievement with "performance assessments," which are intended to reflect real-life situations to a greater degree. These assessments could include more open-ended testing questions, portfolios, essays, presentations, exhibitions, and large projects carried out over a period of time. Compared to multiple-choice, standardized tests, Sacks says these types of assessments would provide a more accurate gauge of student achievement.

Teaching to the test

As the pressure increases for students and schools to perform well on standardized tests, teachers adjust their curriculum to fit the content and format of the tests. Many critics of high-stakes testing claim that teaching to the test pushes certain subjects out of the curriculum and strips away opportunities for students to engage in complex learning assignments. In *Education Week's* special report, *Quality Counts 2001*, 66 percent of teachers surveyed said they must concentrate “too much” on what’s tested at the expense of other subjects. High-stakes tests “are narrowing or dumbing down the curriculum to fit the test,” contends Monty Neill, executive director of FairTest, a nonprofit group that opposes high-stakes testing. Part of the problem, Neill said, is that standardized tests are limited by the kinds of questions that can be asked: “If we reduce history to what can be measured by easy testing, kids don’t learn much history.”

There is also widespread concern that subjects typically not tested upon, such as fine arts and physical education, will be de-emphasized or dropped altogether from a curriculum because teachers don’t have time to teach subjects that don’t appear on the test. Critics say teaching to the test often will focus on using skills in isolation and practicing test formats, such as reading artificially short passages. Maggie Hagan, a teacher at Garfield Elementary School in Youngstown, Ohio, said teaching to the test emphasizes rote memorization at the expense of more complex skills such as problem solving. “These tests have eclipsed the opportunities for teachers to engage our students in meaningful activities and projects,” explained Hagan.

Mary Bostrom, a teacher at John Muir Elementary School in Madison, Wisconsin, is concerned that high-stakes testing may stifle innovative teachers and drive them away from the profession. Recently, she said she was relieved when state lawmakers repealed an extensive high-stakes testing policy. “I have trouble with politicians who have never been in a classroom making these policies from kids,” said Bostrom. “Kids (who) have test anxiety, and kids who are on the low end academically, are the ones who would struggle with high-stakes test. These students are going to get discouraged, and we probably would see more of them dropping out.”

Testing disadvantaged children

A number of studies have found that high-stakes testing is often damaging to the most vulnerable students, such as students of color, students with special needs, and students from low-income homes. Monty Neill of FairTest said minority students and students from low-income homes typically have lower test scores because they rarely receive the same education as children from middle-class or affluent families. Further, he said, standardized tests often make implicit assumptions about a child’s background and social knowledge, often favoring the background and experiences of white, middle-class students. Peter Sacks has found that the best indicator of how a student will perform on a standardized test is his or her parents’ income and level of education. In light of the correlation between test scores and socioeconomic status, it follows that “schools in poor neighborhoods bear the greatest brunt of public and official pressure to raise test scores,” writes Sacks.

Along with the unfair penalties that high-stakes testing place upon disadvantaged students and schools, there have been several studies on how high-stakes tests are associated with higher student dropout rates. In one study, researchers from the National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy (NBETPP) found that in 1986, nine of the 10 states with the highest dropout rates used high-stakes tests.

Standards and testing

Currently, 49 states (all except Iowa) have state standards in core academic areas, up from 14 states in 1996. To measure how well the students are learning the standards, some states have developed their own tests, while others rely on off-the-shelf, commercial tests. According to studies carried out by Achieve – an organization created by business leaders and governors to promote standards-based reports – these commercial tests rarely match up very well with the state standards. Sometimes tests measure some of the state standards but not others, and they often emphasize the less demanding knowledge and skills spelled out in the standards, said Robert Schwartz, president of Achieve. Schwartz maintains that alignment of tests, standards, and curriculum should be the first order of business for states considering high-stakes

testing, as should the implementation of high quality tests that use more open-ended questions and essay questions. Schwartz added that when high-stakes tests are used, students should have multiple opportunities to pass the test.

Standardized testing has been used in public schools for half a century, initially serving largely to compare schools and students with standards set by testing companies. Another use has been to “sort” students and determine who should be in advanced and remedial classes and who should go to college and who should go to vocational school. Now, with standards-based reform taking center stage, more standardized tests are connected to major consequences.

In response to the growing importance placed on standardized tests, more organizations are taking a critical stance. In recent years, resolutions and policy statements have been adopted by, among others, the American Educational Research Association, National Council for the Teachers of English, National Education Association, National Council for the Teachers of Mathematics, and National PTA. In a January 2001 statement, Paul Houston, director of American Association of School Administrators, reiterated his organization’s position on the dangers of placing too much emphasis on standardized testing. “Only on *Who Wants To Be Millionaire?* can people rise to the top by rote memorization and answers to multiple-choice questions,” said Houston. “The final answer to improving education is more than memorizing facts for a multiple-choice test. Children today need critical thinking skills, creativity, perseverance, and integrity – qualities not measured on a standardized test.”

PTA’s Position on Standardized Test and High-Stakes Testing -

National PTA believes that valid assessment does not consist of only a single test score, and that at no time should a single test be considered the sole determinant of a student’s academic or work future. Tests are only one facet of a sound assessment program.

Other components of a sound assessment include instruments that are culturally and racially bias-free and in a language that students understand. Further, assessments should have multiple measures that are performance based, reflecting the different kinds of knowledge and skills that a student is expected to acquire.

National PTA opposes federal legislation and regulations that mandate standardized testing or that would lead to such testing, and federal policies that mandate comparisons of states, school districts, or individual schools. National PTA supports nationally agreed-upon voluntary education standards if they are derived by consensus at the state and local levels. Parents must be involved in this process.

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Written by:
Ted Villaire, Staff Writer
National PTA

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