



To Test or Not to Test? That is the Multiple-choice Question

Standardized testing is a necessary evil. Opponents argue that standardized tests force teachers to “teach to the test,” and as an educator, I can corroborate that statement. However, the incontrovertible truth of the standardized test is that it requires teachers to ensure that students receive at least a minimal education, and holds students accountable for a small amount of knowledge. In today’s struggling education system, that is at least a start.



Opponents claim that standardized tests do not display many other facets of a student’s capabilities. These opponents are simply unfamiliar with the definition of the term “standard” and may want to acquaint themselves with a dictionary to find that it simply refers to “that [which] is regarded as the usual or most common, an average or normal requirement.” I think I can speak for the majority when I say that it is irrelevant that the student is the best finger-painter, website creator, or photographer in the world if the child cannot fill in a circle indicating the correct answer to the question, “What is the capital of the United States?”

What a standardized test is intended to do is to test what is considered a common platform of knowledge. It seems fair to expect all students to know the definition of theme, the purpose of an atom’s nucleus, the year the Declaration of Independence was signed, and how to use the distributive property. Believe it or not, fewer and fewer Americans are able to answer these simple questions. Have you ever had the “pleasure” of catching Jay Leno’s popular “Jay Walking” segment on *The Tonight Show*? In some of Jay’s encounters, Americans were unable to answer a question as simple as the name of the current Vice President. It truly is embarrassing... and frightening.

Unfortunately, relying on grades alone to assess a student’s level of knowledge emphasizes the disparity in education from one educator to the next. Some argue that learning styles and teaching techniques have a dramatic effect on students’ grades. In some cases, that is correct. However, what has often been swept under the rug is the district-level demand for teachers to have a minimum number of low grades. Of course, what this causes is a pampering of grades on the part of the educator to field the “calling out on the carpet” that occasions a teacher’s classroom every few months if he or she



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chooses to maintain a slightly higher standard than the rest. Educators give into district and administrative demands in other ways as well, like administering open-book exams and opting out of assigning homework if it has proven to negatively impact students' grades. Whatever the cause, it is unfortunate to admit but an "A" is no longer an "A." The standardized test reveals the truth of this. It truly is the last honest measure of student learning.

Of course there should be a ranking order of standardized tests as well. Every year, students should take an end of the year exam that tests students on the most basic skills and knowledge they have learned throughout the course of the year. The New York State Regents is the best example of this type of test. Higher-level thinkers will take more challenging tests like Advanced Placement exams and the SAT, which will provide them the opportunity to show that they are more than standard.

Unfortunately, states like Florida and Illinois have recently revealed that a record number of students are failing the Advanced Placement exams as well. Immediately, educators and state governments call for decreased standards or the hiring of higher quality educators, but they are once again missing the mark. If the number of students passing the exam continues to decrease, doesn't this reveal something about the students and district policies above all? Advanced Placement classes were once reserved for the *crème de le crème* of students, but in recent years, there has been a push for mediocre or slightly above average students to take AP classes. In turn, teachers are required to simplify the curriculum to meet the needs of the ill-equipped, under-qualified students. No such accommodations are made on the AP exams, however, nor should there be. So what happens? The discrepancy between grades and actual acquired knowledge is once again revealed.

The bottom line is that all students should be expected to acquire specific knowledge and skills in the course of their educational career. Critical thinking and higher order skills will be measured by more difficult exams like Advanced Placement tests and the SATs. All students should know basic American and World History, how to write in complete sentences and comprehend formal literature, and how to compute fundamental math and scientific equations. Standardized tests should be testing these very basic skills. It really isn't too much to ask of an American student who intends to one day compete in the increasingly global market.



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