



Standardized Testing: Good or Bad for Assessment of Teacher Performance, Assessment of the Education System?

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Standardized testing of student performance has been used for the last four decades as the most meaningful indicator of the quality of US education.¹ It has been touted by legislators as necessary, and has been enshrined in laws like the 1965 “Elementary and Secondary Education Act” (ESEA), and the 2001 “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB). President Obama is continuing the incorporation of standardized testing, though in a more flexible and modified form, in new projected new legislation that he proposed in early 2011².

So standardized testing has been with us and will stay with us for the foreseeable future. And it is criticized by many of those involved in it – students, teachers, school administrators, and state legislators who must find funding for it.

Study Purpose

Standardized testing has been used for many things, such as determining allocation of funding to schools, assessing overall student performance, identifying schools that need help, and a variety of other issues. The purpose of this study is to look at two questions: (1) What does standardized testing say about the quality of our education system overall, and (2) Should it be used for assessing teacher performance?

Standardized Testing Overview

There is a large amount of documented information about standardized testing and its pros and cons. By definition, a standardized test is a test where the same test is given in the same manner to all test takers. It is administered and scored in a consistent, or “standard” manner. It is designed in such a way that the questions, conditions for administering, scoring procedures and interpretations are consistent, and are administered and scored in a predetermined, standard manner.³

Generally, the standardized tests administered to students in grades 3 through 12 are multiple-choice tests, and are scored by computer. Typically, they are constructed in such a way that the total correct responses on the test fall into a wide range – e.g., any one question should be able to be answered by only 50% of the students taking the test, so taking the questions in aggregate, some students can only answer 10% of the questions correctly, while other students may answer 90% or more of the questions correctly. Therefore, when the sum of all the responses for a class or a school are examined, the students can be ranked into percentiles, and a clear distinction can be made for categories of students from “high” performers down to “poor” performers.

These results are used not only to rank the students themselves, but also the entire school.

There are pros and cons to the use of standardized tests.

Standardized Testing Pros

There are a number of advantages to the use of standardized tests⁴:

- Practicality – less time-consuming to give and to grade; use of computers can track the progress and achievement levels of groups of students
- Objectivity – takes emotion and bias out of the scoring
- Agent for Change – clearly identifies low performing students, classrooms and schools, and therefore promotes improvement actions
- Accountability – enables the setting of expectations for students and holding them accountable
- Standardization – all students get tested on the same material in the same manner; provides consistent information about a large collection of students

Standardized Test Cons

The literature is replete with cons about standardized testing. Many of these are related to the use of the results, especially when the test results are used to make major decisions, such as graduation, grade promotion, funding, and assessment of teachers. Such tests are then termed “high stakes” tests, because decisions are made that affect the lives of individuals (students and teachers), and the wellbeing or even existence of certain schools.

The NCLB Act actually forces standardized testing to be “high stakes”, because it is on the basis of the tests that schools are deemed failures or successes, and, in some cases, schools are actually forced to close.⁵

The cons for high-stakes standardized testing can be summarized as follows⁴:

- It affects the curriculum being taught, how teachers teach, and reduces meaningful learning
 - What is tested and what is taught is not the same thing. The testing concentrates on math, reading skills and some science, but that is only a fraction of what students are actually taught (or should be learning).
 - Teachers end up “teaching to the test”
 - The tests are multiple choice, so they test knowledge and skills, but don’t test creative thinking or problem solving
 - Curriculums are adjusted so that schools and students perform better, and therefore students often miss out subjects like civics, music, art and history, i.e., subjects that help make a fully rounded person.

- High-stakes testing has huge negative impacts on students, teachers and schools
 - Schools are held accountable for their performance on these tests. Both administrators on teachers are pressured to raise the school's average score. This can lead to dishonesty – some teachers have been found to cheat (give students advanced knowledge about the test), and administrators may withhold the scores of students with special needs.
 - Funding and salaries are often based on these test results. This may reward overall performance on the test of the school or teacher (whose performance may in fact be more related to the socio-economic background of the students), but does not take into account general improvement.
 - Schools and students that don't perform well are punished. Resources may be removed, students may be shunted into classes where they are not challenged and not expected to perform well.
 - Poor performance is highly demoralizing to both students and teachers, and affects their motivation.
- The standardized test is biased against some of the students taking it. There are numerous factors that can affect how well a student is able to perform on a standardized test, and these are simply not taken into account by the scoring. These factors include disabilities, test anxiety, cultural bias, language difficulties, testwiseness (how to use strategies that help with multiple choice tests – some teachers actually teach this), and socio-economic status.

What Do the Stakeholders Say?

Students, teachers, school administrators, academia and even governmental entities have spoken out against standardized testing or some of its uses.

The National Education Association (NEA) represents all teachers as well as school administrators. The NEA has spoken out against aspects of standardized testing both locally and on a national level. At a meeting between the Las Cruces NEA and the League, NEA representatives stated that there was tremendous pressure to “teach to the test”.⁶ The testing targets are math and reading, and other subjects are given short shrift. Teachers are evaluated once a year, based on a professional development plan. One of the components of that plan is the results of the standardized tests.

Nationally, the NEA sent a 170-page recipe for improving ESEA to Congress in March of 2010.⁷ The gist of that document is “less standardized testing, more help for struggling schools”. Instead of annual testing, the NEA proposes just one test in grades four through six, and one in grades seven through nine. Furthermore, the tests should test reasoning and problem solving skills in addition to the knowledge base of the student. The NEA also stated that the tests should not be used to punish schools or teachers, but should be used as an indicator of where help is needed.

There has been a great deal of discussion in academic circles, in the newspapers and on Internet blogs about standardized testing. The Economic Policy Institute released two highly quoted and discussed reports, the first on August 27, 2010 entitled "Problems with the Use of Student Test Scores to Evaluate Teachers"⁸, and a second on October 21, 2010, entitled "A Statement on Education"⁹. These reports were co-authored by ten individuals who are acknowledged as the giants in the field of education, including Linda Darling-Hammond and Diane Ravitch. Both these reports raise concern about the use of test scores to evaluate teachers. Quoting from the first report:

"A review of the technical evidence leads us to conclude that, although standardized test scores of students are one piece of information for school leaders to use to make judgments about teacher effectiveness, such scores should be only a part of an overall comprehensive evaluation. Some states are now considering plans that would give as much as 50% of the weight in teacher evaluation and compensation decisions to scores on existing tests of basic skills in math and reading. Based on the evidence, we consider this unwise."

And from the second report:

"Adopting an invalid teacher evaluation system and tying it to rewards and sanctions is likely to lead to inaccurate personnel decisions and to demoralizing teachers, causing talented teachers to avoid high-needs students and schools, or leave the profession entirely, and discourage potentially effective teachers from entering it. Educational outcomes will suffer as a consequence... Legislatures should not mandate and districts should not pursue a test-based approach to teacher evaluation that is unproven and likely to harm not only teachers but the children they instruct."

The Obama administration, while still having testing be part of its plan to "Fix No Child Left Behind", is pushing for changes in standardized testing. In a speech to teachers on March 14, 2011,¹⁰ President Obama said:

"I'm not talking about more tests. I'm not talking about teaching to the test. We don't need to know whether a student can fill out a bubble. We do need to know whether they're making progress. We do need to know whether they're not only mastering reading, math, and science, but also developing the kinds of skills, like critical thinking and creativity and collaboration that I just saw on display with the students that I met here. Those are skills they're going to need for the rest of their lives — not just to be good workers, but to be good citizens."

There is strong agreement, therefore, among teachers, administrators, academia and legislators that standardized testing has some value, but changes need to be made in the testing and in the use of the testing results.

Answering the Questions

The purpose of this report was to ask two questions about standardized testing. Based on the research done and the references cited, conclusions can be drawn and the questions answered.

Question 1: What does standardized testing say about the quality of our education system overall?

Standardized testing does give some information about the quality of the education system, but only in the large aggregate. For example, standardized testing does allow the comparison of the education system of the US to that of other countries. But standardized testing does not allow comparing the education system of one state to another, because each state creates its own standardized tests, based on federal guidelines. At the local school system level, though standardized tests are used by the state to compare one school system to another, that comparison is flawed, because standardized test results do not take into account the myriad of factors that affect the performance of any individual school system, such as language barriers and the socio-economic status of its students. What standardized testing IS good for is the identification of schools and of students who need help.

Question 2: Should standardized testing be used for assessing teacher performance?

Interestingly, based on a survey done by Time magazine, 64% of the respondents felt that a teacher's evaluation should, at least in part, be based on the students' scores on standardized tests¹¹. The research cited here, however, indicates that it is generally not a good tool to evaluate teachers. It may be used as a part of the assessment of teachers, but only a small part, because it does not address critical components of what makes a good teacher – how much the students have improved, how much the teacher has motivated the students, how well the teacher has imparted knowledge in fields that are not included on the test, and how well the teacher has been able to impart skills like critical thinking and problem solving in the student.

¹ <http://www.edutopia.org/f-for-assessment>
"Standardized Testing Fails the Exam"

² <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/03/14/president-obama-calls-congress-fix-no-child-left-behind-start-next-school>
March 14, 2011, "President Obama Calls on Congress to Fix No Child Left Behind Before the Start of the Next School Year"

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Standardized_test

⁴ Michigan State University, Department of Education <https://www.msu.edu/~youngka7/testing.html>

⁵ <http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/overview/intro/>

⁶ League of Women Voters of Greater Las Cruces Education Study Committee, Minutes of Meeting with Las Cruces Chapter of the NEA, March 1, 2011

⁷ <http://neatoday.org/2010/03/30/nea-to-congress-less-standardized-testing-more-help/>

⁸ <http://www.epi.org/publications/entry/bp278/>

⁹ <http://www.epi-data.org/education/>

¹⁰ President Barack Obama, "It's Time to Fix No Child Left Behind", speech on March 14, 2011, Kenmore Middle School, Arlington, VA

¹¹ <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,2016994,00.html>