Standardized Test: Give it a Rest

By: Lauren Ballard

Standardized testing provides a fast and somewhat simple way of analyzing students’ and teachers’ ability to effectively meet benchmark standards that states deem “important”. Recent “No Child Left Behind” laws mandate that the American education system uses standardized testing to evaluate if students are meeting standards and are considered “proficient” (“No Child Left Behind”). Government mandated standardized test results are used to help communities identify strengths and weaknesses in their school system, which officials hope will help teachers identify areas that children need guidance in.

The No Child Left Behind Act also seeks to improve schools by “hold[ing]” individual schools, school districts, and states accountable for improvements in student achievement, with particular emphasis on closing the achievement gap between high- and low-performing students and children and youth from disadvantaged groups and minority populations” (Simpson). The theory behind “No Child Left Behind” is: with measurable standards, teachers will be able to see if there is improvement or regression, and based on the numbers, modify their teaching techniques accordingly.

Although the No Child Left Behind Act originally had bipartisan support, “as of February 2004, approximately a dozen states had rebelled against NCLB on the basis that it imposed costly new requirements without funding to carry them out” (Simpson). The limited funds that the government supplies for this program are
only sufficient for very low state standards and don’t come close to being able to fund high state standards (Duncomb).

Not only is there little funding for states to implement the No Child Left Behind Act but if schools don’t meet requirements the consequences are steep. So steep in fact that if schools are not performing favorably they could eventually have to surrender control to state governments. The threat of lost jobs and government control could pressure schools into “focus[ing] on tested subjects especially math and reading” while in other cases may cause undesirable outcomes “such as test score inflation or actual cheating” (Duncomb). School systems are facing pressure from state governments to do well on standardized tests, but “debate [now] rages over whether the law is an effective way to improve academic achievement” (Staff). Critics of the NCLB act argue that not only are standardized assessments incredibly over-emphasized, but that they are also incredibly unconstructive.

With the heavy emphasis on standardized test taking, many teachers are pressed into “teaching to the test”. This implies that teachers will only be “focusing on the content that will be on the test, sometimes even drilling on test items, and using the format of the test as a basis for teaching” (“How Standardized”). This kind of instruction leads to an improvement of test taking skills, which will increase scores, but are scores what we want? No. We want America’s children to become educated jobholders, not experts in test-taking. Teaching to the test doesn’t help children acquire fundamental or higher order capabilities; it forces memorization and narrows curriculum (“How Standardized”).
Teachers, however, cannot be blamed for taking such measures. In Texas, “principals can lose their jobs if their schools' standardized test scores don’t measure up; superintendents can be fired and school boards can be dissolved if districts perform poorly” (Bushweller). With pressure from superiors, teachers are nearly forced into teaching for the test. If scores are low, teachers will be blamed, and jobs could be lost.

Demands for elevated test scores from administration are not the only pressures that teachers face. In 2005, Michigan’s MEAP test rewarded students who passed the state test “$2,500 college scholarships, and in [] middle-class district[s], families need that money. ‘I can’t see myself fighting against MEAP,’ [Ms. Karnes, a Grand Rapids English school teacher,] said. ‘It would hurt my students too much. It’s a dilemma. [Five-paragraph essays] may not be the best [type of] writing, but it gets them the money.’” (Winerip). Teaching to the test, in this case seems like it is benefiting the student since the student will be receiving a scholarship, but in reality the student is learning narrow-minded techniques that will only benefit them in standardized testing situations.

Standardized testing not only creates narrow-focused teaching, but it inhibits other areas of knowledge (that are just as important, but are not in the “curriculum”) from being emphasized in school. In a study done by Leslie Salmon-Cox, 68 elementary school teachers (all of whom administer standardized tests of student achievement) were interviewed about their goals in the classroom. In the study, “every teacher mentioned certain goals for developing children’s social skills-working to improve students’ self-discipling, self-concepts, and ability to get along
with others- as well as cognitive goals" (Salmon-Cox). Primary schools should not only a place where cold facts are rehearsed, but they should be a place where important social and communicational skills can develop.

The drilling and memorization that occupy the time of a teacher that has to “teach for the test” does not allow the child to cultivate citizenship skills. Standardized tests “limit students’ critical, creative thinking, and problem solving,” skills that are just as important post-academia as being able to find the square root of sixty-four (Magnum). At the elementary level, children should learn how to behave appropriately and interact with their peers which is essential to their long-term success.

It is important to talk to children about how to behave in society, because the qualities learned in peer groups are important not only to future employers but also to colleges. The Broad College of Business exemplifies this claim perfectly. For admission to the Broad College of Business students must not only have a competitive GPA, but they must complete a case study. The case study covers topics such as “integrity, initiative, [] resourcefulness, professional relationships, and teamwork” (“Criteria”). All topics deal with what kind of person the student is rather than what kind of scholar the student is.

Even if state standards are more concerned about dealing with the intellectual side of the student, standardized tests are doing nothing but enforcing the memorization of irrelevant facts. A veteran public school principal told Laura Brodie from Psychology Today, “My teachers would revolt if we instituted a standardized test on Pennsylvania history. The whole concept behind standards is
to cover basic knowledge that is essential for everyone-not to memorize facts that are specific to one region” (Brodie). Facts are what the tests are asking for, so teachers make sure their students know them. Knowing who William Penn is may be interesting, but it will not help them find a job.

Professor Fred Barton agrees that much of what we learned in high-school was simply to regurgitate. Students know how to write sentences, make paragraphs, and put it all in order; but they “don’t know how to think” (Barton). In a trip to Averill Elementary School, Nasiah (a third grader that has solely been educated in the “No Child Left Behind” era) demonstrated this idea. Nasiah was instructed to write a cinquain poem. Each line of a cinquain has a different part of speech. The first line of cinquain is a noun, so I asked Nasiah if she knew what that was. She knew exactly what the definition of a noun was, “a person, place or thing”. So I asked if she could think of any nouns that she wanted to write about, she couldn’t. So I listed off a few words and asked her if she could identify which were nouns. She did it perfectly. This stumped me. How could Nasiah recognize noun, but not come up with any to write down? Think of a standardized test. Standardized test questions ask “Which of the following words are nouns?” Nasiah could correctly answer this question with ease. But, if asked what an example of a noun is, she would have trouble answering the question.

Here lies the problem with being a good test taker. Students learn to identify but not actually implement their skills, which is why students “don’t know how to think”. Students learn how to take a test, rather than learning how to apply the
material on the test. Standardized test taking has negatively impacted a whole generation’s ability to think.

As a junior in high school, I took two ACT prep course to help enhance my score. The first ACT program I attended was at a tutoring facility called Sylvan. At Sylvan their technique was to teach you the material that was covered on the test in previous years, so that you could understand every question. They taught me how to identify every part of speech there was. They taught me to add in a personal experience to my story. They even told me that I could have more than five paragraphs (which was unheard of in my school system). I earned a 26.

My parents were happy enough with the 26 but they knew I could do better, and so did I, so my mom put me into a new ACT program that was school affiliated. This course taught me about how test writers prepare the test. I learned how to write the “perfect” five-paragraph essay that exceeded three pages in length. I learned how to cut time on my reading section by not even reading the passages. I even learned a few tactical techniques such as “Three C’s in a row? NO, NO, NO!” I received a 29.

I feel I benefited more from actually learning the material that was on the test rather than learning how to take the test, but my scores did not reflect this. Why did learning the material not pay off as much as learning how to take the test? Because I became an effective test taker.

Standardized tests obviously do not prove anything but how well you have learned to adapt to multiple-choice questions. So are there better ways that our students can be assessed that actually evaluate the student’s knowledge and critical
thinking (all test-taking strategies aside)? Yes, “other nations use performance-based assessment where students are evaluated on the basis of real work such as essays, projects and activities.” (“How Standardized”) To move past the bias of assessing a student’s test-taking ability, state officials need to start implementing more real-life types of questions into their exams.

To take the idea of new types of standardized testing a step further, we could test students’ proficiency in not only scholarly areas, but also in social and creative abilities in group projects. In the workplace, often times workers participate in group work. Being able to work in a group setting is an important skill for all students to develop. Eliminating multiple choice testing altogether is not realistic, because it is cost effective and can test some important cognitive skills. However, if the US were able to implement different sections to the tests we would be able to generate more well-rounded scores and inevitably more well-rounded students, since teachers would teach to those parts of the tests as well.

Another way state officials could enhance testing would be to require meaning behind the essay portion of the exam. If the writing section was not based solely on grammar and being able to “tell a story”, but had some sort of ethical or meaningful message behind it, teachers would be able to include lessons about ethics into their curriculum without scrutiny. Schools need to not only help produce students that have the potential to find employment, but they also have a responsibility to produce well-rounded citizens.

The implementation of a new kind of standardized test, that is not so heavily based in multiple choice, could have many positive implications to not only

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student’s scores but on their level of “test-stress” as well. Test stress is a common anxiety felt by students taking standardized tests, it can “undermine students’ confidence and affect their performance. Stressed-out students may find themselves unable to concentrate or to remember things they’ve learned” (“Handling”). Standardized tests are so emphasized in school that students feel an enormous amount of pressure to do well.

But what happens to students who actually do score poorly, weather the reason be stress-test or actual incompetency? Children “who score poorly may [become disillusioned and stop trying” (Magnum). Not only will these students feel defeat for future tests, but they could be placed into separate classes based on scores. The student will then suffer the consequences of lower-level class placement.

The result-pressure related to standardized testing has not only affected students but it has also turned the whole school system’s focus on continually improving their numbers. Teachers across the US are afraid to be held accountable for students who receive low scores and “subsequently be evaluated poorly, miss out on bonuses or contribute to their school and district’s inability to receive funding for meeting or exceeding federal benchmarks” (“Standardized”). In Atlanta, almost 80 percent of the district’s schools were named in a cheating scandal, and there have been numerous scandals in other areas such as California, Connecticut, and Pennsylvania. Teachers, not only students, are feeling the anxieties that these tests can produce. If standardized tests changed format, teachers might be more confident in their students scores and eventually stop “teaching to the test”.

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No Child Left Behind’s rigorous multiple-choice style of standardized testing is depriving America’s youth from a quality education. Students are not only missing out on learning but they are missing out on the appreciation of learning. America’s youth is so wrapped up in getting a high score that they can’t focus on educational value. Students are supposed attend school to enrich their minds, not to memorize irrelevant facts and learn how to take a test. Test taking skills are no longer valuable post-graduation, to be successful students need actual skills and an ability to analyze and think.
Works Cited

Barton, Fred. Personal interview. 8 Nov. 2011.


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