Standardized Tests

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What type of school did you attend? Did you attend private school, public school, charter school, or were you home-schooled? In each type of school, there is one big difference that separates one school from the other. Also, in each category of schools, there are different policies that the executive board members of the school feel will help govern the school better. There is one policy, however, that connects all schools, and that is standardized testing. Whether or not we want to take these tests, as students who are college-bound, we all have to face the inevitable.

Everywhere throughout the U.S., many students are beginning to pull out their pencils to start preparing for the many standardized tests that the government administers to us. As a country, we have the ACT, the SAT, and more specific to the state of Michigan, the MEAP, and the MME. Standardized tests, when they first came about, were to decide which class a student should be enrolled in and which students needed more help. These tests recognized that each student was different, so at one time these tests helped students to get the help they needed and rightfully deserved. Today, these tests evaluate the failures and successes of the students, teachers, and the school (“Measuring What Matters Least”). The earliest form of testing originated back in China where they would test how much of the Confucian theory and poetry (“Brief History: Standardized Testing”). This would determine if these government contenders would be able to land the “dream job” they desired. The first standardized test in America was the SAT. The Scholastic Aptitude Test came about from the College Board in 1926 (“Brief History: Standardized Testing”). “The original test lasted 90 minutes and consisted of 315 questions testing knowledge of vocabulary and basic math and even including an early iteration of the famed fill-in-the-blank analogies (e.g., blue:sky::____:grass). The test grew and by 1930 assumed its now familiar form, with separate verbal and math tests” (“Brief History: Standardized Testing”). Then in 1959, an education professor at the University of Iowa named Everett Franklin Lindquist developed the ACT as a challenger to the SAT (“Brief History: Standardized Testing”). The ACT measures the same things however, the exam included a section that led students toward a course of study by asking questions
about their interests. In addition to math, reading and English skills, the ACT assesses students on their knowledge of scientific facts and principles (“Brief History: Standardized Testing”). Eventually, these two test ended up being “the end all, be all” when it comes to entering college and what college the student attended.

In today’s times, these standardized tests do not only test the intelligence of children. These days, if a school's standardized test scores are high, people think the school and their staff is effective. If a school's standardized test scores are low, they see the school and its staff as ineffective. In either case, because educational quality is being measured by the wrong yardstick, those evaluations are apt to be in error (“Why Standardized Tests Don't Measure Educational Quality”). One main reason that standardized test are really important is because schools want funding. If the standardized tests are low, the school is considered a failing school, and for that year, the school doesn’t get as much funding. The high school I graduated from, Ferndale High School, at one point was considered to be a failing school. In a nut shell, what the creators of standardized tests were trying to do was to measure the skills that each student gained from their school. However, these test created a big problem for many students. The big question is: What happens to the students who do not take tests well. There are many students who excel in their homework, projects, and other class assignments, but perform below average on their tests. With this being said, how can a test assess the knowledge of each student if some students do not have the skills to perform well on a tests? Another flaw in these tests is that the questions are made my humans, but scored by machines. Being human beings, we are flawed creatures. In turn, the questions that people write may be biased, confusing, or maybe stupid. Why are we giving children biased, confusing, stupid questions on a test that may decide their entire lives? These tests in a way determine our lives. The ACT and the SAT gives us test scores back that determine which colleges will accepts us. These types of test cause high emotions and anxiety for some students and even teachers. The anxiety that comes with these test affect what is taught and how things are taught by teachers in the
classrooms. There is a misconception that what is being taught in the classroom is what is being tested on the test. This is what Michigan State University calls “testing-teaching mismatches”. MSU did a study almost 20 years ago and “researchers found that as many as 50% of the items on a nationally standardized achievement test may cover topics that students wouldn't in the classroom in a given locality” (“Standardized Testing”). Teachers also know what is going to be on the test, and they want their students to do well on the test, so teachers will spend more time going over the topic they are positive will be on the test. This may not be seen as a con; however, the bad part is that teachers may not get a chance to go over the other material that they wanted to cover throughout the year. This may result in students not learning what they are supposed to learn in that specific grade. Worst case scenario is that they are not prepared when they move on to the next grade. Another con in standardized testing is that we spend a lot of time punishing schools for failing these tests as a whole. If the school is a failing school for a long time, the government will first take away funding, and eventually take over the school. These methods in MSU’s opinion aren’t the most helpful. MSU researchers feel that when the government sees that there is a failing school, they should spend more time helping the students and helping that school improve (“Standardized Testing”). The main con that distresses the students is the emotional effect students have towards the test. Prior to the test, the students will definitely feel nervous; tests just have that effect on students. Let’s say a student does poorly on these tests, this will ruin how a student feels about himself or herself in regards to their school work. Students may no longer have the motivation to try or even do better to improve their scores. This may even affect their work in the classroom. When a student gets depressed about their work, this lowers the teacher’s morale. There isn’t really anything a teacher can do. After the students are basically told that they are “dumb” through test scores, there is nothing a teacher can say to lift their spirits. This is very discouraging, but unfortunately, this is very true in many schools.
Yes, there are many reasons why Standardized tests are bad, but there must be reasons why they are still used. One reason, in my opinion, is the without these standardized tests, the government will not be able to differentiate between the “good schools” and the “bad schools”. If standardized testing did not exist, this would even the playing field for all schools. Other reasons include because these tests are practical. Aspects of this include: “Standardized tests are less time-consuming than more complicated assessments that need personal time with every student; Standardized tests are easier to administer; There are explicit directions given and each student is given the same directions in the same way; They are easier to grade, machines do it for us; Very easy to use a computer to track progress and levels of achievement for different groups of students in different subjects” (“Standardized Testing”).

The practicality of the test is the most obvious and strongest argument that is “Pro-Standardized Testing”. Another pro of Standardized Testing is the test gives teachers guidelines of what to teach and when to teach it (“Pros and Cons of Standardized Testing”). As stated before, the teachers know what will be on the test, so they will teach lessons that correspond with the test. The result is less wasted time which helps with time management. The test also gives parents a chance to see where their child in school compared to the students in their school and other students both locally and nationally. Lastly, the tests keep tracks of how each student is doing over the years. The tests are able to show if they are improving, losing ground scholastically, or staying the same (“Pros and Cons of Standardized Testing”).

The pros of Standardized Testing are very good arguments, but are not enough to overlook the cons.

Being a student in the state of Michigan, I have come in contact with these standardized tests. I am not sure when my first encounter with these tests were, but no student can forget the anxiety they feel right before these big tests. I never knew or even cared to know the reasoning behind these test; all I knew was that they were test and I was expected to do well on them. I’ve been told that I am a good student all my life, so when these tests would come about I wasn’t too worried, but I just wanted to make sure that my best was the best locally and nationally. I remember on my MEAP tests, I always tested above
average in every section; I was satisfied and so were my parents. The unique thing in my situation was that I attended a private school that was nationally recognized as a great school. At such a young age, I never realized that sometimes your environment may affect your test scores. I ran into that scenario once I began to attend Ferndale High School my freshman year. Many students were not concerned about their grades and going to college the way I was. That never affected my grades, but I know some of my fellow students who fell into the wrong circle of friends and their grades went downhill. In the process of writing this paper, I've learned that the intent of these tests were to assess the skills of students in school. It hardens my heart that the intent of these tests has been changed. These tests, in my opinion, do more harm to the school, teachers, and especially students more than they do help anyone. Surprisingly, I am not the only person who is disappointed by these tests. Actor Matt Damon spoke passionately about his criticisms toward Standardized Testing. This past August, Matt Damon attended a “Save Our Schools” rally in Washington D.C. During this rally, Damon spoke zealously about how none of the qualities which made him who he is - his imagination, love of acting, passion for writing, love of learning, and his curiosity - were things which could be tested (“Matt Damon's Impassioned Take on Standardized Testing”). He also spoke on how he had exceptional teachers in his lifetime and he does not know where he would be if their job security was based on how well he and his fellow students performed on standardized tests. None of the educators that attended the rally had an opinion on what Matt Damon had expressed. It has been tested and proven that “when young people learn in order to achieve a certain grade or test score, rather than out of a genuine interest in a particular subject matter, a pattern of dulled, disembodied experience can easily be created within them as their learning and personal experience begin to dangerously separate from each other” (“Matt Damon’s Impassioned Take on Standardized Testing”). Sadly, I am one of those students. I’ve always wanted to good grades in school so I learned the material to the best of ability just so I could see that
pretty in red “A” plastered on the top of my test. I’d like to think I turned out okay, but not every child is like me.

I have run into many children in my life; from my little cousins to kids in my church. I have not had the chance to sit with them on an academic level, but I have been fortunate to recently meet a girl name Mar’kyia Gilchrest. “Kyi” as she likes to be called, is the 3rd grader I help at Averill Elementary. She is next in line to be sucked into the cycle where she must take these standardized tests. Unlike her, I never had the help of college students with these Standardized tests so I would consider her to be lucky. However, there are some things that worry me about Kyi. Kyi, in my opinion, is a very smart girl, but she doubts herself. She doesn’t try as hard as I think she wants to. I’m not sure if she feels she is afraid to be right or just thinks she’s always wrong. When it comes to these standardized tests, I’m afraid that she will be the student that maybe won’t do as well as she would like on the tests and will be discouraged for the rest of her academic career. Since noticing this in her, I encourage her for trying and verbally praise her for being right to try and ensure that she will know how smart she is. I really hope that the pressures of standardized tests do not negatively affect her, because the 4th grade MEAP is only the beginning for her.

Standardized tests have been around for as long as I can remember, and as far as I can tell, they are not going anywhere any time soon. This is policy that affects the lives of our students, their parents, the faculty and administrators of every school around the country. Since engaging in this Service Learning Project at Averill Elementary, I’ve learned that it only takes one person and a great idea to help someone. As a democratic society, we must do more than just react to policies that affect us openly. Service Learning projects are the first step in doing more than just reacting; we must also help each other.
Works Cited


