Standardized testing in the K-12 schools

Teachers are frantically running around their classroom jamming every last bit of information they can into the student’s minds before the big day comes. Parents and teachers are stocking up on number two pencils while reminding the children that this test is very important all day long. Then test day arrives. Ever since “No Child Left Behind” was made into a law in 2002 by President Bush, standardized testing has become an obsession that is harming public education in this country.

“No Child Left Behind” has the main goal to improve student educational achievement in public education because children of the US are falling lower in education compared to the rest of the world. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) is a three-yearly survey of the knowledge and skills of 15-year-olds in the principal industrialized countries. It works with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) which ranks how each country is doing in education. The 2009 survey found that China and Korea were significant above the OECD average in all subject areas. The United States is ranked 17, which is middle range. They were ranked significantly below the OECD in mathematics and reading. These results are saying the US is failing in education compared to the other countries of the world, so that’s why the government implemented the “No Child Left Behind” policy.

Starting in a student’s primary education standardized testing is too frequently used. The “No Child Left Behind” policy states that by the 2005-06 school year, states were required to begin testing students in grades 3-8 annually in reading and mathematics. By 2007-08, they had to test students in science at least once in elementary, middle, and high school. The tests had to be aligned with state academic standards. A sample of 4th and 8th graders in each state also had
to participate in the National Assessment of Educational Progress testing program in reading and
math every other year to provide a point of comparison for state test results. By 2014 all students
must be at the same academic level, or funding and teacher’s jobs would be in jeopardy

(Education Week). Standardized testing is not done in foreign countries during primary school
unlike the US, and PISA shows those countries have more educated students. Secretary of
Education Arne Duncan has results for the 2011 tests which are showing nearly 82% of schools
have failing standards in conjunction with “No Child Left Behind” (McNeil). Another example
of the failure of the tests was shown Colorado schools during four consecutive testing periods. It
was concluded that a test score gain for one testing period was more likely to fail the next year.
Only 1/20 schools improved for 3 years in a row (Kober 14). Standardized testing is not helping
students, teachers, and researchers improve education and has many disadvantages.

Tests are given in primary school, and this is only harming the students. Smith and
Rottenberg, education researchers, reported that mandated testing in elementary school has
reduced time for instruction, the neglect of non-tested curriculum content, and increased use of
test preparation materials. Children this young are still developing their brains, so test results
comparing how students have done is not necessary (Kohn). Children can not express what they
have learned just by the standard tests given by the state. It seems that they are testing children
how long they can concentrate and sit still instead of the content. A child will begin to view tests
as simple facts that must be memorized during test prep time, instead of absorbing new
knowledge to be learned. They drill students on what they will be tested on and they go beyond
the curriculum only to teach test-taking skills (Burley); this is called teaching to test. Important
valuable material which the child must know in an upper class is not taught, and the child will
suffer in the future. Also kids are told by the teachers during classroom test prep to do really
good (so the school and teacher get funding), so if they do really bad on the test, they will begin to hate tests, school, and eventually learning. High-stakes environments push dropout rates up (Nathan).

Standardized tests are designed for the white, middle class, but everyone still takes the same test. Close to half of the students in urban schools (which have a much higher ethnic population, who may come from completely different cultures or just not be sufficiently familiar with aspects of American culture) are still failing the Massachusetts test. In Massachusetts, among black and Latino students, the failure rate is between 60% and 70% (Nathan). Students in the lower class are not exposed to cultural capital as the more elite students. Bourdieu says schools reward students on the basis of their cultural capital, defined as “instruments for the appropriation of symbolic wealth socially designed as worthy of being sought and possessed” (DiMaggio 190). It is said teachers are able to communicate better with students in the upper class, since they see students as more intelligent (DiMaggio 191). Students that have the privilege to be exposed to books and museums have a better chance of understanding the dominant culture. The test format does not fit the cultural needs of the lower class (DiMaggio 190). The black white education gap still exists today even if both go to equally funded schools. The reason for the gap does not depend on money or what they have been exposed to but on how the family raises the child. The way a white family communicates at home differs from a black family at home, so the child learns how to answer questions a certain way (Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips).

Language differences also give students the disadvantage when taking a test. A student could be intelligent, but since the tests are timed, the student will take more time translating the questions in their head. One teacher said that "due to a rigid language testing system...we could
not grant diplomas in June to three of our bright, resourceful, and courageous immigrant students" (Lala 12), all because these students did poorly on standardized tests. This is less of a problem since some tests can be given in different languages, but language is still a problem with testing.

Most tests are in the form of multiple choice, and this a poor way of testing since it does not test true intelligence all the time. The questions are memorized fact based, where you don’t need to expand your thought on. Little thought must be put into these tests because one does not need to explain why the answer is what it is. These tests allow to guessing, and it is possible for someone to guess on half the test and get a high score. "I don't think there's any way to build a multiple-choice question that allows students to show what they can do with what they know," says Roger Farr, professor of education at Indiana University (Pollard). Roger is saying that students can only choose one answer with this form of test. This does not allow students to use critical thinking. Also since there only is one specific answer for a topic, students that learned multiple things about that topic can not show all they know about it. Multiple choice avoids critical thinking, and if teachers prepare students for this kind of test critical learning is left out of the curriculum.

Essay tests allow students to express more, but it is also a bad form of testing. Firstly, not all students from different backgrounds have learned to test in this manner (Dimaggio 191). Different social class and races learn differently than how the tests are designed for middle class whites as stated earlier. Secondly, the state can order a student to write in a certain way while harming the student’s creative writing skills. Schools over teach the basic three paragraph structure essay. First you have an opening, then a body, and you finish with a conclusion. The MEAP orders students to use personification in their writing, but a student can write a perfect
story without using it. Practice tests and telling students that they wrote the story wrong will allow the students to be less creative and dislike writing. Thirdly, the essay graders are usually not evaluated by educators. They are required to read thousands of papers in a short time and so, are skimming the papers and not grading correctly. "There were times I'd be reading a paper every ten seconds," one former scorer told a reporter. Sometimes he "would only briefly scan papers before issuing a grade, searching for clues such as a descriptive passage within a narrative to determine what grade to give. `You could skim them very quickly ... I know this sounds very bizarre, but you could put a number on these things without actually reading the paper,'" said this scorer, who, like his coworkers, was offered a "two hundred dollar bonus that kicked in after eight thousand papers (Pollard)." Essay tests harm students by not allowing everyone to get the score they deserve since the tests are not designed for the specific needs of a student and inaccurate grading of scores. The one test that is supposed to allow more creativity is really making students become less creative with all the writing requirements.

Norm-referenced tests are the most pointless forms of tests. “Norm-referenced tests compare the performance of the students to each other. No matter how well or how poorly students do on norm-referenced tests, there will always be a top 10% and a bottom 10%; there will always be 50% of the students who have test scores that fall below the median (Pollard).” This test is not even measuring student’s intelligence. It is only comparing students. It’s a label for who is smart and who is dumb. If the best score on the test was a failing grade, that person would be labeled as the best even if they failed. This is helping no one with results, but making school a bigger competition. Schools need to avoid portraying learning as a competition since students will then start to believe I scored lower, and thus I am dumb. “Standardized tests are not accurate even though it is a statistic, so they have a standard error of measurement. Standard
error can also be viewed as an estimate of how much a student’s score on a given day will vary from his or her “true” score — in other words, the hypothetical score the student would receive if the test were perfectly accurate (Kober 9).” Tests are given in a certain time period, and usually a student comes and takes the test, and that is it. A student can be having a very bad day, where they just learned a relative has died, and do poorly on a test they can get a perfect score. Other factors are not being able to get enough sleep or food before the test because of the student’s financial issues. Distractions during the test can also affect how a student does on that one particular test. Taking one test and labeling the student and school as either successful or failing is forgetting that there is a standard error of measurement in the tests. “According to one study of a nationally normed test, two students with the same “true” achievement at the 45th percentile are likely to score within 10 percentile points of each other less than half the time (Rogosa, 1999).” Taking this into account allows us to guess what is a truer score the student received, but there still is not definite way to find out if this is the true score.

The results of the test do not help the students or the teachers because of how the test is set up. The test is usually in the spring of the school year, so the results are not given back to the teacher until the following school year. The teacher has a brand new class, so she can not teach the students what mistakes they made on the test. The students do not get to see what they did wrong on the test because they just send you a score. One can ask to obtain the test to see what they got wrong, but if it does not come originally in the mail students and parents will just look at the score and move on. This test does not allow people to learn from their mistakes, and that is one of the best forms of learning. The Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition did a study on the effect that getting things wrong had on the participants’ ability to retain the correct information. Kornell, a cognitive psychologist who studies learning and
memory, said the trivia study and a related one both serve to prove the idea that “making errors is the best way to learn information that you want to learn.” Kornell also emphasized that the best way to learn from an error is to examine it and come up with a solution on your own (Silverman). Since the test does not let you learn from your mistakes, the test does not improve the students education. I stated earlier Colorado’s school did not improve test scores year after year. If teachers got feedback and could help their students sooner then test scores would be able to rise.

Students are the ones expected to cheat on tests, but now even the teachers and education administration is cheating on these high stakes test. The newest scandal happened this year in Atlanta, Georgia where 178 teachers and principals changed student’s answers on the Criterion-Referenced Competency Test (CRCT), so that the school receives better scores. “Ten states now use test scores as the main criterion in teacher evaluations. Other states reward high-scoring teachers with up to $25,000 bonuses – while low scores could result in principals losing their jobs or entire schools closing. Even as the number of scandals grows, experts say it remains fairly easy for teachers and principals to get away with ethical lapses (Jonsson)”.

This is becoming a wide spread issue in our country. The New York Times reported that recent investigations in Georgia, Indiana, Massachusetts, Nevada and Virginia also pointed to cheating by educators (Chen). “No Child Left Behind” has caused schools to do whatever it takes to save their jobs. Not only has it caused the US do not rank higher in world education, but it created a country of criminals.

There is another way to examine what students have learned in school, and many colleges already do not require test scores. The National Center for Fair and Open testing reported that 775 American colleges do not require test scores. There are other ways to determine if that
student is suitable for a specific college. The grades and extracurricular activities are important. Teachers get to really know their students, and having them write a report on the child’s educational process would be much more effective than taking a test especially in the younger year. If the student is talented in the arts instead, a teacher will be able to give excellent remarks. Standardized tests only test a standard fact based object that can be measured by writing on paper. Some kids are more talented than adults, but never get recognized because their test results showed failure.

During my primary and secondary school experience I remember nothing but turmoil when it came to taking the MEAP, ACT, and SAT. The tests were timed, and I liked taking my time on things. I got all A’s, but the tests made me look less intelligent than I actually was. Now I am studying in order to become an elementary teacher. The issues of standardized test are never going to go away, and now my job depends on the test scores of students in my room. In my hometown Troy, Michigan the school system has enforced the policy on paying teachers depending on how well the students do on a test. Many non-educational distractions like having a bad day or poor home life can have negative effects on the score; therefore, how the government and school districts rely enormously on the inaccurate results to fire teachers and place students in a lower learning track makes standardized tests harmful to our nation. The use of standardized tests is and waste of time and money, and it needs to be stopped.


Rogosa, D. (1999). Accuracy of individual scores expressed as percentile ranks: Classical test theory calculations. CSE
