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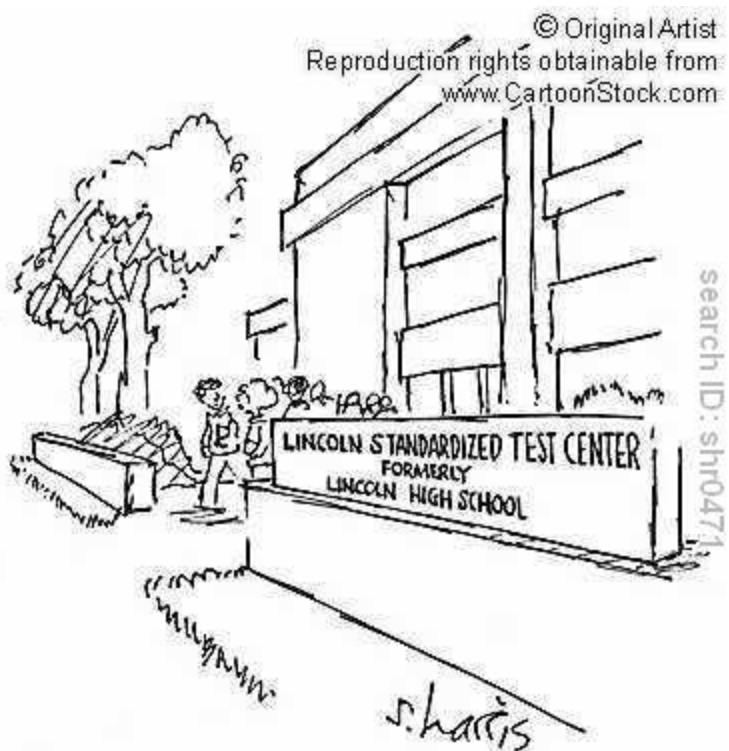
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Leaving Many Children Behind:

Standardized Testing Leads to Inefficient Education

As educational theories have come and gone, different forms of testing have been popular at different times. However, the one type of testing that seems to have survived the ages is standardized testing. These tests are supposed to make it easier for schools, districts, states, and the federal government to gauge how the public education system is working and whether or not students are learning at the right level (Webb, 2006, 362).

When I was a sophomore in high school, I was attending a public school in Salt Lake City, Utah. That year, all sophomores were required to take the Utah Basic Skills Competency



Test (UBSCT). In order to graduate, students needed to show that they had reading, language and math skills.

As the test date drew nearer, my friends and I were a little frightened at the prospect of showing that we had learned something our last ten years of schooling. But how were we to begin to study for a test that reviewed ten years of knowledge?

We all took the UBSCT over the course of two or three days and then didn't receive our results until the school year was almost over. Luckily, most of my friends and I had passed; one of my friends, Brad was not so lucky. He failed the math test by one point and would have to retake and pass the entire test before he could graduate his senior year.

Did this mean that Brad was at a different grade level than the rest of us? Had he not received the best education possible just because he failed a standard test by one point? No, Brad was a bright student and had a very good GPA. However, he was not used to standardized testing as he had been home schooled up until his sophomore year.

George Madaus, Michael Russell, and Jennifer Higgins, all professors at Boston College, have commented on the dangers of standardized testing to gauge students' knowledge and a schools ability to teach:

Instead of seeing test takers as unique individuals and schools as complex institutions, willed ignorance also allows proponents of high-stakes testing to use the same one-size-fits-all test to quantify and objectify students and their schools. Given the diversity of students and the complexity of teaching and learning, proponents choose to ignore that relying on the same single quantitative measure for all students and schools as the key reform tool is analogous to using a sledge hammer to renovate a house (23).

Standardized testing has hindered more than helped the U.S. education system. It leads to inequality to education as those schools that need federal funding the most, are not able to receive it because the test scores from those schools are lower. Standardized testing is not an

effective way to judge a student's abilities or level of thinking. Finally, standardized testing has led to a decline in the professionalism of teachers, as they have become more like programmers rather than educators and they have to prepare their students to take standardized tests instead of teaching their students.

Why standardized testing?

In the early 1980's, a document named "A Nation at Risk" was published. This document told everything that was supposedly wrong with the United States public schooling system and how education had caused recent economic problems. At this point, most states implemented standardized testing to assess whether their students were achieving in the public schools. Before the passing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002, the testing that occurred varied within each state. When NCLB was put into action, however, every state was required to "develop standards, standardized tests and accountability systems" (Hursh, 2005, 606).

According to David Hursh, an associate professor of teaching and curriculum at the University of Rochester, the arguments for standardized testing in NCLB were that standardized testing was "necessary within an increasingly globalized economy", would reduce educational inequality, such as which schools received more federal funding than others, and the tests would increase assessment objectivity. Hursh, however, suggests that instead of reaching these goals, NCLB and other US educational reforms are actually "increasing rather than decreasing inequality and that student assessments do not provide objectivity claimed" (606).

Denied to those who need it most

The schools that need federal funding the most, those schools in low socioeconomic neighborhoods, are not able to receive said funding because test scores in those neighborhoods are typically lower than in other areas.

Therefore, these schools with low test scores will either try to weed out those students that are bringing down test scores or they will hold them back another year. As of 2009, 29 states required students to pass a state standardized test in order to graduate from high school, and those who could not pass the test were told to get a GED instead of a regular high school diploma (Madaus, Russell, & Higgins, 2009, 2). According to Ken Goodman, Professor Emeritus at the University of Arizona, College of Education, NCLB and educational law “sets up conditions in which it is to the advantage of schools to drive out low achievers.” He then says that “NCLB requirements lead to massive numbers of failing learners (Goodman et al., 2004, 8).

JoBeth Allen, a researcher and professor at the Department of Language and Education at the University of Georgia, wrote an article that told stories of “Children Left Behind”. One of these stories is about a girl named Cammi, who was an exceptional bright and motivated student who had overcome many family issues. Cammi had high goals of attending college, however she had only been given a certificate of attendance at her high school graduation instead of a diploma because she had not passed a state mandated science test by one or two points. Cammi was never able to go to college (Goodman et al., 2004, 155). Because Cammi’s school wasn’t able to see her as a student instead of a test score, her educational needs were not met, even though she wanted to get that education.

Not only are students being pushed out or held back, but they are actually dropping out, a fact which some schools choose to hide in order to still receive their federal funding (Goodman et al., 2004, 8). According to Goodman, the dropout rate of high schools will continue to increase as “NCLB reaches more punitive phases” (8).

One of the greatest facts about our country is that we have the public education system. In some countries, only students who come from privileged families are able to get an education.

However, in the U.S., all students are accepted, despite their backgrounds. Yes, there is inequality in our schools because of differing socioeconomic circumstances, but the U.S. government is going about fixing the problem the wrong way. It is interesting that as the government has tried to provide equal public education for all students, and as they have attempted to leave no child behind, they have done the complete opposite. Education is still as unequal now as it was ten years ago when NCLB was first enacted.

Part of this continuing, and even increasing inequality is because funding for schools is based on higher test scores, which come in small supply at schools in poorer parts of the country. Hursh explains that “school scores closely correspond to the average family income of the school’s students, with urban schools, composed primarily of students living in poverty and of colour, scoring poorly compared to largely white and middle-class suburban schools” (Hursh, 2005, 607).

In an informal online survey, 80% of the responders answered that they did not think that more funding should go to schools with higher test scores. If the government wants those students from lower income areas to have better test scores, then those schools need to receive more federal funding to improve their schools and to provide a better learning environment for their students. This does not mean that those schools that have higher test scores shouldn’t receive funding; they just shouldn’t be the only schools getting those funds.

Standardized tests are for soldiers, not students

The first time that standardized tests were used was surprisingly not by educators in public schools, but by the military. In World War I, army officials noticed a need for officers. They asked the American Psychological Association to come up with a test that would point out which soldiers would be better officers than others based on their “intellectual abilities. These

tests became known as the Army Alpha tests. Following World War I, standardized tests that used this same idea were implemented in education (Solley, 2009, par. 9).

Why then have the U.S. and state governments adopted tests that were initially meant for adult soldiers instead of child and teenaged students? Because in the 1960's, it was believed that a standardized test was the best way to determine school and district success and also evaluate a child's learning (Solley, 2009, par. 8). Since then, standardized tests have become more popular to determine a child's learning.

However, because of standardized tests, students are only learning and memorizing enough to pass a test instead of becoming engaged in learning and gaining knowledge.

Proponents of standardized testing argue that the tests allow teachers and students to have a clear idea on what the objectives of the class are to be (Frase & Streshly, 2000, 8). Don W. Hooper, the president of the American Association of School Administrators gave a comparison of two students. One of the students is in a classroom that is "happy" and although not relaxed, is "energized" because the teacher, students and parents know the learning objectives and goals and "the assessment will verify their success". The other student is in a classroom that "seems happy" and relaxed. The student "rarely knows the objective" takes a "normal-teacher made test and annual achievement assessment". Hooper says that although both students may enjoy their learning experiences, their outcomes will be different. He asks the question, "Which student will longitudinal data show is not well prepared for life, and which is far ahead in the quest for making a living and succeeding at life?" The intended answer is the student who takes standardized tests (Hooper, 2005, pars. 1-4).

How is it known that the student who had annual standardized tests will have a better and successful life than the student who took "normal-teacher made tests"? These students have not

only had different testing experiences, but different learning experiences. Because the standardized testing student has only learned test preparation, he doesn't have any knowledge of anything other than that which will be on the test. In the online survey, one of the responders said:

The way the tests are graded doesn't necessarily tell you anything about a student's knowledge, but rather their ability to answer the way they want it. If you write outside the box the answer doesn't count, even if you are right".

Just because a student doesn't take standardized tests, it does not mean that he or she is less prepared for life. Actually, he or she may be more prepared for life, as he or she may have a vaster knowledge base.

In the online survey, one responder said that standardized tests were not the best form of testing a student because "all children learn differently." Another responder said that "some children do not do well with these kinds of tests". Students come from many different backgrounds, just like Brad, who had been home-schooled until high school and never taken a standardized test before.

Madaus, Russell, and Higgins said that in our society, we have two cultural values that feed into the supposed need for standardized testing. One of these values is "achievement is an individual accomplishment" and the other is that "individuals must display their accomplishment publicly". They suggest that most middle-class children have these values ingrained in them and accept them (62). However, what about those students who come from different racial, ethnic or disadvantaged backgrounds? They may not have accepted these values and therefore are not prepared for having their entire education based on whether or not they do well on a "one-size-fits-all" standardized test.

What about teachers?

According to Stephen G. Sireci, the Director of the Center for Education Assessment in the School of Education at the University of Massachusetts, “Good instruction starts with good curricula and both influence each other. The development of curricula at the district and state levels is certainly influenced by what teachers teach in their classrooms.” Therefore, according to Sireci, standardized tests are the way to measure the outcomes of teaching (Sireci, 2008, par. 3).

Standardized tests, however, do not show the outcomes of teaching, but instead of programming. Teachers are expected to develop their curriculum around standardized tests to ensure that their students will be able to pass a test. The ability to use creativity in their lesson plans has disappeared, and the need to plug test answers into their students’ minds becomes essential.

William Hayes, a former member of the New York State Council of Superintendents, said “Teachers complain that the learning activities that students enjoy and benefit from the most are often omitted” as these lessons take away from test-prep time. He said that some teachers will spend weeks, even up to a month at the end of each course to review and test their students to get them ready for standardized tests (Hayes, 2004, 71).

Because teachers aren’t able to teach in the way that they want to, their professional status is at jeopardy. In the online survey, 80% of the responders believed that because of standardized testing, teachers have become de-professionalized. Wendy Goodman, a bilingual teacher in Tucson, Arizona said that:

In teachers’ lounges across the country one hears a common lament, “In the past, no matter what was happening outside, no matter what was mandated, I could close the door and teach. Now they won’t even let me teach any more.” (Goodman et al., 2004, 232).

Teachers have had training on how to reach out to children and help them learn. Standardized testing puts a big question mark on that training. It makes those who have a passion

for teaching and helping students reach knowledge feel as though there is no longer a point in planting that seed of knowledge, as the students will only remember it long enough to spit it back out onto a test.

Reformation of the tests

Standardized testing is not working to equalize education and it limits the amount of learning that a student can gain. There still needs to be a way to test students and what they have learned, but a “one-size-fits-all” test is not the answer.

One of the responders to the survey suggested that students put together a portfolio. Another suggested frequent tests that show a snapshot of what students are learning. Madaus, Russell and Higgins suggest that students who struggle with testing be given appropriate accommodations. They also said that frequent tests would help students with testing (182, 187).

If we can find some other way to test students, according to their different learning styles and different backgrounds, then we can better equalize education. Teachers will be able to teach again, and students will not have a limit to the knowledge that they can receive, ultimately leading to less children being left behind.

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