

Spring 2016

The Takeover of Standardized Tests

Karlie M. Lieberth
kml117@ziips.uakron.edu

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you [through this survey](#). Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

Follow this and additional works at: http://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), and the [Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Lieberth, Karlie M., "The Takeover of Standardized Tests" (2016). *Honors Research Projects*. 325.
http://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/honors_research_projects/325

This Honors Research Project is brought to you for free and open access by The Dr. Gary B. and Pamela S. Williams Honors College at IdeaExchange@UAkron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Research Projects by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@UAkron. For more information, please contact mjon@uakron.edu, uapress@uakron.edu.

The Takeover of Standardized Tests

Karlie Lieberth

University of Akron

Honors Research Paper

“Sometimes the most brilliant and intelligent students do not shine in standardized tests because they do not have standardized minds”. This quote, said by Diane Ravitch, perfectly showcases the main issue with standardized testing in schools. High-stakes testing is and will forever be taking place in our education system. As a future educator completing my student-teaching experience, I am faced with the stress of standardized testing. I have noticed this especially within the last few weeks being that testing occurs in late April of 2016. Many of the teachers are stressed about the upcoming tests due to the fact that the scores affect their teaching status. The students are concerned about how they score on the tests. Much of the preparation time that goes into standardized testing involves test-taking tips. In my experience, the students are taking their science “AIR” tests on the computers. Because this is the first year for the tests have gone electronic in this school district, my cooperating teacher and I had to set aside several days just to show the students how to navigate throughout the test.

As I chose to enter into the world of education for the rest of my working life, I never thought about the troubles that come along with standardized testing. Standardized testing began with the development of the Scholastic Aptitude Test in 1926. Since then, the SAT is just one of the variety of high-stakes tests our students have to take in their schooling (Fletcher, 2009). Although the names of the tests that students have to take seem to be constantly evolving, the principle is the same. States need a way to monitor how school districts are performing and believe that the correct way to do this is to administer each child from various districts that are the same age identical exams. No one takes into account how the areas that the schools are located in may differ nor do they look at how the students that make up the schools are each unique in their own way.

As a young adult who entered the teaching profession to help students thrive and blossom into their own individual selves, it is bothersome that students are all evaluated under the same criteria when they are not all instructed or raised in the same way. Going through schooling we are constantly taught how to differentiate instruction so that each student received a successful, fulfilling education. Once we are hired, we are expected to teach exactly to the standardized tests. This takes away from the students' worthwhile learning experience. While I understand the need to examine how well our students are progressing through their schooling, I believe it needs to be on a more individualized basis. So, the question that lies within this situation is if we rid ourselves from standardized testing, how will each school district within the state be held accountable for properly developing the minds of our youth?

The idea behind the standardized tests goes back to the development of the standards themselves. Standards-based education was presented in the United States around 1980 during the space race between the U.S. and Russia. In fact, the publication of the text *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 showed the flaws in our education system. The concern was that with decline in our education system, we would no longer be leading the world in innovative experiences. As each state developed the standards, they were to report not only which students had met each standard but also to what extent the standard had been met. Each state was held accountable for the progression of their students.

As of 2016, the state of Ohio has a report card for each school district. Report cards for every school district can be found on the Ohio Department of Education's website. Within each school district, each school is issued a letter grade based on their performances on those standardized tests. These grades reflect how well the district performs in various areas. For example, one of the criteria the school districts are evaluated on how many students passed the

state tests. Another is how well students scored on the test. Districts are also assigned a letter grade for progress. This category gets broken down even further to overall progress, lowest 20% in achievement and progress for those students with disabilities. Lastly, the school district receives a letter grade for gap closing. Gap closing is meant to show that all students, regardless of race or gender, are achieving.

As we move on through the history of this issue we quickly approach the year 2001 where George W. Bush implemented the act called *No Child Left Behind*. This act required that all students are administered the same standardized test (specialized per grade level) despite any special educational services some students may have needed or received. States were evaluated based on how well they performed on the standardized tests. Consequences were administered to those schools that were not meeting the expectations set by the federal government. Worst-case scenarios included schools that were shut down or reformed by the government due to low scores. To go along with the standardized tests, the federal government decided to develop a set of standards to teach the students. While the names of the standards are always changing, the newest set was developed in 2009 and named Common Core. They have been modified and changed each year. As of now, the standards that the state of Ohio uses are called Ohio's New Learning Standards (Girod, G. R., Girod, M., 2012).

The names of the standardized tests administered to students in grade school are always changing. The new test that teachers everywhere are preparing their students for is called the newest rounds of standardized tests developed by the company called AIR (American Institutes for Research). The AIR test has been developed enough so that certain subjects, such as science, take the exam on a computer rather than paper and pencil. According to the AIR official website, their goal is to work alongside day-to-day operations and develop better-designed assessments.

The claim is that they make better use of the data that is collected from the assessments administered to students. AIR refers to those states and school districts that use their tests as clients (AIR Assessment, 2016). As a future educator, I feel that it is somewhat alarming that we preach to teach to every child's needs; yet we are buying into the idea that a big business should create assessments to measure student growth. These tests are not taking any specifics about school districts, teachers or students when they are creating these assessments but instead are generalizing aspects of education and expecting them to apply to every student in every school district.

Standardized testing has taken a large toll on many students and parents. Parents have begun to have their child opt out of taking the standardized tests (Just Say No To the Test). These opt outs are meant to serve a variety of purposes. First, the parents want to send the message to schools and government that they want their child to be in meaningful classrooms that focus on learning as opposed to test preparation. Parents are also taking a stand against the tests because they feel that a standardized test does not accurately reflect the diversity that lies within a school. Parents believe that these standardized tests do not showcase the abilities of students who are of different gender/race, English language learners, low-income youth, and children with learning disabilities. Parents believe that these tests are not assessing our students on what is truly important. Rather than the ability to recall information, they wish to have their students assessed on skills such as: creativity, leadership, critical thinking, etc. (Just Say No To the Test).

Many parents trust that opting out of the testing will lead to an end of standardized tests and in the process help not only their children, but teachers and school districts as well. In the 2014-2015 school year, the teachers at Norton Middle School in Norton, Ohio were told that

those students who chose to opt out of the PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers) would not hurt the way the state evaluated the district. While the state was about to receive their grades, the Norton School District was told that the information they had previously thought to be true was false. Those students whose parents decided for them to opt out of the state testing counted as zeros for the school as well as the district. I had learned this information during my student teaching experience while attending various staff meetings. Because opting out of the tests counted as zeroes, the grade that the schools received was significantly lower than the staff had anticipated. As a way to avoid any further opt outs, the middle school has set up a rewards system for those students who choose to take the AIR tests. The school set up a field trip for the entire school and informed the students that whoever takes the test and tries their best gets to attend the field trip.

Standardized testing not only impacts the students, but the teachers as well. Teachers have an enormous amount of pressure on them when it comes to preparing the students for whichever standardized test is being taken that year (*The Unintended Consequences of High-Stakes Testing*). As a student about to make the transition into the educator role, I am faced with the struggle of what to teach every day within a limited amount of time. In a general classroom, there is such a great amount of diversity that lies within students. Whether you are talking about income levels, cognitive IQ, past experiences or gender, no two students will ever be the same. So what should we teach? According to *The Unintended Consequences of High-Stakes Testing*, most say that the reason children are in school is to learn facts and knowledge that are transmitted from teacher to student. The idea is that everyone is taught the same information and is to prepare for the standardized test towards the end of the year. Those students who have learning disabilities are still required to take the same test as a student who may be identified

gifted. There are many other components of learning that a student experiences than retaining information and filling in bubbles on a test. *The Unintended Consequences of High-Stakes Testing* also argues that students should be learning skills that will help them choose careers, understand culture, and be able to apply the knowledge they learn rather than taking tests.

According to the text titled *The Unintended Consequences of High-Stakes Testing*, there are two types of learning standards. The first, called testing standards, is what we have developed in our school systems. Testing standards require teachers to instruct our students for mastery of the content. Educators drive their lessons based on test scores. These standards only assess one measure of competency, are tightly sequenced, and are developed by outside figures such as politicians. As explained in Ohio's New Learning Standards, each grade level is designated each own set of standards describing what children should be able to do. The ultimate goal of testing standards is the achievement of each standard by each child.

The Unintended Consequences of High-Stakes Testing also describes another type of learning standards called professional standards. Professional standards differ from testing standards in every category. Where testing standards has educators putting their efforts into mastery of the content, professional set guideline for teachers' professional development. Professional standards are not created by outsiders to the schools but rather are created by educators, community members, and parents. These developed concepts are broad and therefore do not follow a specific sequence. These standards measure multiple levels of understanding. The ultimate goal of professional standards is learning as opposed to achievement.

As a future educator, one of my greatest concerns is that the politicians that come up with the same standardized test for each state and grade level do not take into account any personal experiences our students today are bringing to the table. Many young students who attend school

have a lot occurring in their personal lives that may impact their learning. One aspect of education I have learned from my student teaching is that students are a product of their environment. This means that if education is not highly valued by a student's role models, then they themselves will not appreciate learning.

Another issue that students unfortunately have no control of is poverty. In an analysis called *The Burden of Poverty, a Backpack for Heartache* conducted by School News Network it showed a strong correlation between the levels of poverty and test scores. School districts whose family incomes at the low end tend to perform worse on standardized tests than those school districts with high family incomes. Those schools that perform lower on standardized tests receive more pressure from the state. They are under constant threat of losing jobs or worst-case scenario having their school shut down. Because of this, these students who attend the low-income schools are receiving the very basic information in order for them to achieve a passing test grade. Often times these students are not left to achieve at a high academic level.

Standardized testing does not only impact low-income schools, but high-income schools as well. From personal experience during my student teaching, an entire two to three weeks of school was essentially lost due to standardized testing. Not only this, but teachers are rushed attempting to fit in all that will be test throughout the school year. Teachers are often faced with the struggle of teaching the material in depth to ensure student comprehension. Often times, they have to barely scratch the surface of the material in order to keep progressing and moving along. The weeks prior to the test were spent on review, practice tests, how to navigate through the test that was to be administered on a computer, etc. While the tests typically take less than two hours, teachers are left with the puzzle of what to fill the rest of the day in with. Students have lunch and specials, such as band, they will still attend, and normal class time is cut extremely short. By

the time students have completed the standardized AIR tests their brains are tired. It is more difficult to engage students in active learning after they have been sitting for almost two hours testing.

Pressure from standardized tests is not only felt by teachers and administrators, but by students as well. During my student teaching at Norton Middle School, I decided to gather opinions from students on the matter. In a survey I conducted amongst 150 fifth graders at Norton Middle School, I asked students two questions. The first was whether or not standardized tests made them nervous and why or why not. The second was asking them if they would rather take their tests on paper or on a computer and why. Not to my surprise, 85% of the students responded that they feel extremely nervous while taking these tests. I received many different reasons as to why these students feel so nervous about standardized tests. Some students said it was because their parents put pressure on them, others said it was because they wanted to advance to the next grade while others simply said they get nervous for all tests. The reason for my second question being asked was because the standardized science test is on the computer this year for these students while language arts and math are completed with paper pencil. The results were about 50/50. Those students who were nervous about taking the test on the computer said it was because they had never done it before and were worried they would click a wrong button. Others were happy about computer-based tests because their hand would not hurt from writing. In my personal experience I witnessed several students sobbing before the tests because they were concerned about their results. Students were also panicking because they felt they were not allotted enough time to finish the test and perform well on it. Test anxiety in students often hinders their ability to appropriately demonstrate what they have learned.

Standardized tests have seemed to monopolize our school systems in today's world. While it is important that we ensure student successes and hold teachers as well as school districts accountable for progression, a test given to every child in the state does not seem to be the most effective way to measure success. There are other alternatives in place that could be used instead of standardized tests. Examples of these alternative assessments could range anywhere from portfolio-based assessments, random sampling, to performance-based assessments.

Portfolio-based assessments take place when students systematically collect their work and other related materials that reflect their accomplishments in one or more school subjects. "The collection should include evidence of student reflection and self-evaluation, guidelines for selecting the portfolio contents, and criteria for judging the quality of the work. The goal is to help students assemble portfolios that illustrate their talents, represent their writing capabilities, and tell their stories of school achievement..." (Venn, 2000, pp. 530-531). There are two types of portfolios that could be used as alternatives to the tests: process portfolios and product portfolios. Process portfolios showcase the learning process and the progression of growth. Product portfolios "...demonstrate mastery of a learning task or a set of learning objectives and contains only the best work." Portfolio-based assessments provide a great deal of advantages that are not seen in standardized tests such as: student self-evaluation, critical thinking, reflection, cooperative learning, goal setting, structures learning in stages, and "Enabling measurement of multiple dimensions of student progress by including different types of data and materials" (Venn, 2000, p. 538). While they do require extra time and planning, portfolio-based assessments would be an excellent alternative to standardized tests.

Random sampling can also be paired alongside with portfolio-based assessments. Random sampling involves a variety of student portfolios being selected in different classrooms. An independent group that may contain teachers from other schools, community members, etc. then evaluates these portfolios. This is an example of a fantastic alternative to standardized testing because it does not involve any outside person who knows nothing about the school districts. It still holds everyone accountable because they will never know which portfolio will be chosen for evaluation. Likewise, it holds teachers accountable because their students' work will reflect their ability to properly progress students through the learning process.

Lastly, performance-based assessments are another great alternative to standardized tests. Performance-based assessments are those that require the student to physically do something, such as completing a task that shows what they have learned. Portfolios may fall under this category of assessments but there are other types of performance-based assessments that could be used in schools rather than standardized tests. In science, experiments involving inquiry are valid ways of assessing students' progress. For example, providing students with a broad question or problem for research and allowing them to develop their own experiment or solution for it while guiding them provides the students with a deeper level of thinking. It also allows teachers to assess how well these students have developed their critical thinking skills as well as problem-solving skills. These performance-based assessments allow school districts to evaluate what students have learned without giving them a stressful test.

Throughout this paper, I have expressed many different aspects of standardized tests that are not beneficial to our education system. There are other solutions that could, and hopefully do some day, replace the testing that occurs within our schools annually. As a future educator, it is my hope that the state will start to take into consideration aspects that make up the school itself.

The most important goal of education should be to prepare our youth for everything that life has to offer and to set them up for success.

References

1. AIR Assessment. (2016). Retrieved from <http://www.air.org/page/air-assessment>
2. Fletcher, D. (2009, December 11). Brief History: Standardized Testing. *Times*. Retrieved from: <http://content.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1947019,00.html>
3. Girod, G. R., Girod, M. (2012). Standards-Based Schools. In *Example Chapter* (Volume 1, Chapter 4). Retrieved from: http://www.wou.edu/~girodm/100/brief_history_of_standards.pdf
4. GreatSchools Staff. (2016). Testing in Ohio: an Overview. *GreatKids*. Retrieved from: <http://www.greatschools.org/gk/articles/testing-in-oh/>
5. Hargrove, T., Jones, B.D., Jones, M. G. *The Unintended Consequences of High-Stakes Testing*. Retrieved from: <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=rTUVAgAAQBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PP1&dq=high-stakes+testing+poverty&ots=NnNaNmyQml&sig=Oz78xdnGBMrMW8aMSSrDQojwtBs#v=onepage&q=high-stakes%20testing%20poverty&f=false>
6. Just Say No to the Test. (n.d.). Retrieved from: <http://www.fairtest.org/get-involved/opting-out>
7. Pollard, J. (2002). If Not Standardized Tests, Then What? *World Prosperity*. Retrieved from: <http://www.standardizedtesting.net/standardized.htm>
8. Venn, J. J. (2000). *Assessing Students With Special Needs (2nd ed.)*. Retrieved from: <http://www.unm.edu/~devalenz/handouts/portfolio.html>