

Fighting the Tests: A Practical Guide to Rescuing Our Schools

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By Afia Khan

Don't let anyone tell you that standardized tests are not accurate measures. The truth of the matter is they offer a remarkably precise method for gauging the size of the house on the school where the test was administered. Every empirical investigation of this question has found that socioeconomic status (SES) in all its particular aspects for an overwhelming proportion of the variance in test scores when different schools, towns, or states are compared.¹ This ignorance would be the most charitable approximation for why charts are published that rank schools (or towns or states) by these scores - or why anyone would use these rankings to draw conclusions about classroom quality. However, if this were the case, we would not be here. We would have already seen the results and we could have done nothing about them. We would not be here because we have been told that the results are not statistically significant. In fact, the scores are very significant for SES and are very useful because the tests themselves are inherently flawed.² This assessment is borne out by research findings that show high scores on standardized tests and relatively shallow thinking. One such study classified elementary school classes as "actively engaged in learning if they went back over things they didn't understand" and questioned those of themselves as they read, and tried to contact them when they were doing so that they had already learned. Students were classified as "superficially engaged" if they just copied down answers, quoted a lot, and skipped the hard parts. It turned out that the superficial style was positively correlated with high scores on the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS) and the Metropolitan Achievement Test (MAT). Finally, the correlation between high scores on standardized tests and shallow thinking was stronger in high-achieving schools than in low-achieving schools.

What if the role of a student's thinking is also to vary of a teacher's instruction? A risk in scores may be more than meaningless; it may actually be precise for concern. What matters is how that change was brought about and what had to be sacrificed to make it happen. Across the nation, schools under intense pressure to show better test results have allowed those tests to cannibalize the curriculum. Administrators have cut back or even eliminated parts of electives, projects, and hands-on learning. They have cut back on social and moral learning, discussions about current events (and what is not on the tests), the use of literature in the early grades (if the students are focused narrowly on decoding skills), and written subject area work such as science (if the tests cover only language arts and math). Students will be judged on the basis of a multiple-choice test. Teachers may use multiple-choice exercises and in-class tests frequently. (This has probably been called the "ramping down" of instruction, and it is a very accurate description.) Teachers are more likely to be superficially engaged than to be actively engaged. They are more likely to be focused on the test than on the learning process. In my experience, the people who work most closely with kids are the most likely to understand how harmful standardized testing is. Many teachers - particularly those who are very talented - have what might be described as a "dislike/neutral relationship with these exams. Support for testing seems to grow as you move away from the students, going from teacher to principal to central office administrator to school board member, state legislator, and state superintendent. These latter groups are more likely to be "superficially engaged" and to be more concerned about the test results than about the learning process. These latter groups are more likely to be "superficially engaged" and to be more concerned about the test results than about the learning process. These latter groups are more likely to be "superficially engaged" and to be more concerned about the test results than about the learning process.

There is much more to be said about how standardized tests ensure what matters least. There is only so much creativity that can be infused into preparing students for bad tests. There is only so much buffering that can be done in a high-stakes test. These recommendations merely try to make the best of a bad problem. Ultimately we need to work to end that bad thing. To move beyond standardized tests and to end the current futility that are consuming our children's policies in having to make the best of a non-acceptable situation because it will still exist. First, if you are a teacher, you should do what is necessary to prepare students for the tests - and then get back to the real learning. Never forget the difference between these two objectives. The clear ability to do this on one's own mind, and whenever possible, help others to understand that the distinction. For example, you might write a letter to parents explaining what you are doing and why. "Before we can begin preparing and assessing students in class, which I hope will have the effect of helping your child to do better than this year in a scientific, or a social studies, or a language arts class, we must first prepare them for the standardized tests. We will be able to return before too long to what research supports as a more effective kind of instruction." If you're lucky, parents will act, you're definitely going to know why their kid can't able to perform more effectively than instruction all the time. "Excellent question!" you'll reply, "you have made a point containing the address and phone numbers of the local school board, state board of education, legislators, and the governor. Second, do no more test preparation than is absolutely necessary. Some experts have argued that a relatively short period of instruction is sufficient to the extent that students are not so overwhelmed by the test that they are unable to perform. Third, whatever time is spent on test preparation should be as creative and worthwhile as possible. To avoid by the clock (if you're in the back of Monday, with little effort, what they want the meaningful curriculum. 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