

Poor Teaching for Poor Students

More Reasons to Boycott the MCAS Tests

By Alfie Kohn

It is becoming increasingly clear that the MCAS is effectively hijacking the curriculum in suburban schools, forcing teachers to suspend innovative instruction in order to prepare students for the test. Still, the question remains: What about children of color and children of poverty, who too often receive an education that is inferior by any measure?

Few would disagree with the need to "raise standards" and insist on "high expectations" for all schools and students. In practice, though, these slogans can often be reduced to a crude series of monosyllables: "Test scores are too low. Make them go up." The implications are ominous for all students because standardized tests tend to measure the temporary acquisition of facts and skills, including the skill of test-taking itself, rather than meaningful understanding.

While the current curriculum framework for Massachusetts includes some admirably sophisticated guidelines, the MCAS questions pegged to those standards are similar to some of the worst tests used in other states.

For example, one eighth-grade learning standard states that students will "engage in problem solving, establishing evidence, searching for connections, and the process of inquiry."

But here is a question on last spring's test ostensibly illustrating that standard: "The suspension system of a truck includes the:

- (a) engine and carburetor.
- (b) wheels and axles.
- (c) brakes and muffler.
- (d) steering wheel and speedometer."

To raise scores on any standardized test, particularly when those scores determine whether a student will receive a diploma, teachers often feel compelled to put test preparation ahead of richer forms of teaching. This is more likely to happen, according to researchers, in schools with higher percentages of minority students. "Skills-based instruction, the type to which most children of color are subjected, tends to foster low-level uniformity and subvert academic potential," observes Dorothy Strickland, an African-American professor at Rutgers University.

Thus, an emphasis on raising test scores threatens to turn second-rate schools into third-rate

schools. In a circular bit of reasoning that would be almost comical if the consequences were not so appalling, some observers endorse heavily scripted instruction on the grounds that it seems to be successful. But this, it usually turns out, means nothing more than higher scores on these same deeply flawed exams.

In response to talk about the importance of “higher expectations” for minority children, we might ask, “Higher expectations to do what? Submit to more efficient drilling to prepare for tests — or pursue engaging projects that promote sophisticated thinking?” The corporate-styled “accountability” movement arguably lowers meaningful expectations due to its reliance on standardized testing as the primary measure of achievement. When civil rights groups and sympathetic judges, understandably outraged by disparities among school systems, uncritically use such tests as indicators of how much progress has been made, they may be unaware of how much harm they are doing by legitimating and perpetuating a reliance on such testing.

Besides the effect on instruction, four other questions might be raised about the effect of testing on equity.

* How fair are the tests? For decades, critics have demonstrated that many standardized tests are biased because their questions tap a set of knowledge and skills more likely to be possessed by children from a privileged background. It is more than a little ironic to depend on such tests as a way to address educational inequities.

* Who can afford better preparation? When the stakes rise, people seek help anywhere they can find it, and companies eager to profit from this desperation by selling test preparation materials and services for the MCAS have begun to appear on the scene. Naturally, affluent families, schools, and districts are better able to afford these products – and the most effective versions, thereby widening the gap.

* Where is the money? Anyone who is serious about addressing the inequities of American education would naturally want to investigate differences in available resources. A good argument could be made that the fairest allocation strategy is to provide not merely equal amounts across schools and districts, but more for the most challenging student populations. Unfortunately, the high-stakes approach, to the extent it involves funding, often entails precisely the opposite: give more to those already successful (e.g., as bonuses) and less to those whose need is greatest. Thus, the poorest families, schools, and towns suffer most from policies enacted by officials who claim to be committed to higher standards for all students.

Some observers minimize the matter of resources and assume that all we need are forceful demands to “raise the bar.” The implication would seem to be that teachers and students could be doing a better job but have for some reason chosen not to do so and need only be bribed or threatened into improvement. The focus among policy makers has been on standards of outcome rather than standards of opportunity.

Worse, this emphasis has often been accompanied by a tendency to ignore the barriers to achievement in certain neighborhoods. Explanations about very real obstacles such as racism, poverty, fear of crime, low teacher salaries, inadequate facilities, and language barriers are sometimes written off as mere “excuses.” This is at once naïve and callous. Like any other attempt to minimize the relevance of external constraints, it ultimately serves the interests of those fortunate enough not to face them.

* What is the most likely consequence? When high stakes are applied to educators, those who teach low-scoring populations will be most likely to be branded as failures. If excellent teachers and

principals decide to leave the profession as a result of incessant pressure to raise scores, we would expect minority and low-income students to be disproportionately affected by the departure of these educators.

When high stakes are applied to the students themselves, meanwhile, there is little question about which students will be disproportionately denied diplomas as a consequence of failing an exit exam — or will simply give up and drop out in anticipation of such an outcome. If we allow our education officials to make a student's fate rest on a single test, the likely result over the next few years will be nothing short of catastrophic, resembling what might without exaggeration be described as an educational ethnic cleansing.

The MCAS, like other examples of a get-tough approach to school reform now sweeping the country, is supported by several distinct groups. Some want to serve up our public schools to the marketplace, where the point of reference is what maximizes profit rather than what benefits children. Given that goal, it makes sense to give a test that few adults could pass in order to create the impression of school failure, the better to pave the way for privatization.

Others who support - or at least passively accept - the use of high-stakes testing have no such ulterior motive. They merely want an objective and reasonable indicator of learning, and they may want a mechanism by which the gap between rich and poor, black and white, can be narrowed. On the first count, the MCAS fails utterly. On the second count, it is likely to be not merely ineffective but counterproductive. Small wonder that a movement to boycott the test attracts more interest with each passing week.

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