Standardized Testing and Its Victims (**)
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By Alfie Kohn

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The tests have swelled and mutated, like a creature in one of those old horror movies, to the point that it now threatens to swallow our schools whole. (Of course, on "The Late, Late Show," no one ever insists that the monster is really doing us a favor by making its victims more "accountable." But let's put aside metaphors and even opinions for a moment so that we can review some indubitable facts on the subject.)

Fact 1. Our children are tested to an extent that is extraordinary, and nowhere else in our history has this much testing been done. American students have had to sit through tests, never have the tests been given so frequently, and never have they played such a prominent role in schooling. The current situation is also unusual from an international perspective: Few countries use standardized tests below high school age or multiple-choice tests for students of any age.

Fact 2. Noninstructional factors explain most of the variance among test scores when cities, states, or districts are compared. A study of math results on the 1992 National Assessment of Educational Progress found that the combination of four such variables (number of parents living at home, parents' educational background, type of community, and poverty rate) accounted for a whopping 88 percent of the variance in scores, all such district-level standardized tests have found comparable results, with the numbers varying only slightly as a function of which socioeconomic variables were considered.

Fact 3. More-referenced tests were never intended to measure the quality of learning or teaching. The Stanford, Metropolitan, and California Achievement Tests (SAT, MAT, and CAT), as well as the Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills (CTBS) and others that will replace them, are all tests of how much you know after past learning, not how much you can learn in the next few tests.

The main objective of these tests is to rank, not to rate; to spread out the scores, not to gauge the quality of a given student or school.

Fact 4. Standardized testing can have bizarre effects if they ask questions that are not related to past learning. For example, if they engaged if they just copied down answers, guessed a lot, and skipped the hard parts. It turned out that high scores on both the CBEx and the MAT were more likely to be found among students who demonstrated superficial approaches to learning. Similarly, studies of middle school students (also using the SAT, the college-admission exam) have found that there are many students who think deeply and score well on tests—plenty of students who do neither. But, as a rule, it appears that standardized-test results are positively correlated with a shallow approach to learning.

Fact 5. Virtually all specialists condemn the practice of giving standardized tests to those 8 or 9 years old or say "virtually" to cover myself here, but, in fact, I have yet to find a single reputable scholar in the field of early-childhood education who endorses such testing for young children.

Fact 6. Virtually all relevant experts and organizations condemn the practice of basing important decisions, such as promotion or graduation, on the results of a single test. The National Research Council takes this position, as do most other professional groups (such as the American Educational Research Association and the American Psychological Association), the generally pro-testing American Federation of Teachers, and even the companies that manufacture and sell the exams. Yet just such high-stakes testing is currently being used, for example, in New York State.

Fact 7. The time, energy, and money that are being devoted to preparing students for standardized tests have to come from somewhere. Schools across the country are cutting back or even eliminating programs in the arts, recess for young children, electives for high schools, class meetings and other activities intended to promote social and moral learning. When the test scores are raised, the use of literature will naturally be cut back (especially if the test requires reading and decoding skills), and entire subject areas such as science (if the tests cover only language arts and math). Anyone who doubts the scope and significance of what is being sacrificed in the desire to raise scores has not been inside a school lately.

Fact 8. Many educators are leaving the field because they feel that "accountability" is being done by the wrong standards. I have no hard numbers here, but there is more than enough anecdotal evidence—corroborated by administrators, teacher-educators, and other observers across the country, and supported by several state surveys that have been made public. The major premise here, that low-income minority students have been badly served for years, is hard to deny. But the problem is that the cure is in many ways worse than the disease—and not only because the treatments (for example, in the form of bonuses for good scores) almost never have the desired effect. In some districts, the students (using the other SAT, the college-admission exam) have found that there are many students who think deeply and score well on tests—plenty of students who do neither. But, as a rule, it appears that standardized-test results are positively correlated with a shallow approach to learning.

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Fact 9. *The tests may be biased.* For decades, critics have complained that many standardized tests are unfair because the questions require a set of knowledge and skills more likely to be possessed by children from a privileged background. The discriminatory effect is particularly pronounced with norm-referenced tests, where the impetus to spread out the scores often propels questions that tap knowledge and skills more likely to be possessed by children from a privileged background. The discriminatory effect is particularly pronounced with norm-referenced tests, where the impetus to spread out the scores often propels questions that tap knowledge and skills more likely to be possessed by children from a privileged background. The discriminatory effect is particularly pronounced with norm-referenced tests, where the impetus to spread out the scores often propels questions that tap knowledge and skills more likely to be possessed by children from a privileged background. The discriminatory effect is particularly pronounced with norm-referenced tests, where the impetus to spread out the scores often propels questions that tap knowledge and skills more likely to be possessed by children from a privileged background. The discriminatory effect is particularly pronounced with norm-referenced tests, where the impetus to spread out the scores often propels questions that tap knowledge and skills more likely to be possessed by children from a privileged background.

Fact 10. *The quality of instruction declines most for those who have least.* Standardized tests tend to measure the temporary acquisition of facts and skills, including the skill of test-taking itself, more than genuine understanding. To that extent, the fact that such tests are more likely to be used and emphasized in schools with higher percentages of minorities has been made good faith, but it is also the case that such schools are more likely to need such tests to begin with. Consequently, if schools are given to the practice of giving standardized tests to children younger than 8 or 9 years old, the generally pro-testing American Federation of Teachers, and even the companies that manufacture and sell the exams. Yet just such high-stakes testing is currently being used, for example, in New York State.

Fact 11. *The tests are a precursor to a culture of educational apartheid.* As W. James Popham argues, the problem is that the cure is in many ways worse than the disease—and not only because the treatments (for example, in the form of bonuses for good scores) almost never have the desired effect. In some districts, the students (using the other SAT, the college-admission exam) have found that there are many students who think deeply and score well on tests—plenty of students who do neither. But, as a rule, it appears that standardized-test results are positively correlated with a shallow approach to learning.

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