

The Role of Standardized Testing in Public Education

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ABSTRACT

Standardized testing has long been a cornerstone of public education in the United States, influencing student achievement, curriculum design, and educational equity. While these tests provide a uniform metric for assessing academic progress, they have also generated significant controversy. Advocates argue that standardized tests offer objective and reliable measures of student performance, guiding educational policies and resource allocation. Critics, however, contend that these assessments narrow curricula, contribute to inequities, and inadequately measure critical thinking skills. This paper examines the history, types, purposes, and impacts of standardized testing, evaluating both its benefits and drawbacks. Additionally, the role of technology, accommodations for students with disabilities, and potential alternatives to standardized assessments are examined. Ultimately, a balanced approach is necessary to ensure that standardized testing supports rather than hinders educational advancement.

Keywords: Standardized testing, public education, academic achievement, curriculum impact, educational equity, high-stakes testing, test validity.

INTRODUCTION

In American public education, standardized tests have been the subject of heated debates over the past decade. The high stakes attached to their results have caused controversy among an array of concerned professionals. Educators blame the tests for the restriction of curriculum, students' loss of interest and dropout rates. Some parents argue the tests are administered too often, distract the students from actual learning, and do not accurately assess the students' actual abilities. Standardized tests are instruments of assessment designed by testing companies with the objective of maintaining uniformity in scoring presented by different examiners under the same conditions. They make use of objective tests, mostly consisting of multiple-choice questions and machine scored, as well as essays and completion items, hand scored, with clear and rigid standards usually developed by experts in accordance with cognitive and linguistic assumptions. The scores are scaled in a way as to range from 120 (barely literate) to 180 (well read) for each grade. Based on the results of the tests, a numerical value called PL (pass level) is determined for each school. The passing rate of the school is then calculated, which in turn will indicate if the school needs to improve on matters of educational quality. Due to an amendment introduced at the 8th grade level of Turkish public education, passing the proficiency level of a standardized test became mandatory in order to advance academically. The schools' quality was depicted solely in terms of the passing rate of their students. For that reason, the exam has taken on the name of SSPT (Student Selection and Placement Test). The amendment has stirred up a frenzy in the milieu. Parents have legitimate fears that if their students do not get a chance to go on to high school, they will not get any sort of formal education, as the vocational training schools such as the impoverished village institutes will be phased out. Nowadays, teachers can hardly keep in touch with their students as they are required to teach more hours in greater number, leaving little room for counseling, more than often resulting in student alienation and irresponsibility. Against the backdrop of such vastly harsh conditions, a fierce

competition for the right to high school education was something that our society could do without [1, 2].

History of Standardized Testing

Standardized testing is a pervasive part of public education in the United States; students generally begin taking them when they first enter elementary school, and these tests (or ones like them) continue to be relevant through the duration of their education. The development of the standardized test as a means for educational assessment relates closely to wider industrial, social, and academic trends throughout the past two centuries. Because the system has been in use statewide and by the College Board for most of the 20th century, this era in particular will serve as the focus, but standardized tests were in development long before their current incarnate. The earliest roots of standardized testing as it is known today can be traced back to China in 605-1905 AD, when the prevalence of the “imperial examination” was high. These tests were taken by male citizens only, usually at the age of 20 to determine fitness to join the imperial bureaucracy. The importance of these exams was less about the questions on the exams and more about the setting of the exams; the taking of an exam was a dedicated ritual that signified the importance of the event. By contrast, most other examinations in the world at that time entailed an oral response to a question posed by an examiner, a far lower ritualistic form. The system did become less fair over time, as wealthy families would bribe the local officials to exempt their children from taking the exams, leading to the intended form of leveling of opportunity to be negated by economic standing. In 1905 the examination system was stopped after a governmental change [3, 4].

Types of Standardized Tests

Standardized assessments are routine in public education, varying in design to assess different student performance levels. They include formative and summative assessments. Formative assessments enable real-time monitoring of student learning, acting as check-ins during lessons. Summative assessments, on the other hand, evaluate overall understanding at the end of units or courses, often as final exams. They may involve quizzes or in-class exercises for formative assessments and final projects or exit exams for summative assessments. Standardized procedures govern both types, with summative assessments frequently represented by criterion-referenced or norm-referenced tests. Criterion-referenced tests gauge students’ understanding of specific skills against set standards, while norm-referenced tests compare performance against peers, using fixed percentile rankings. Multiple-choice exams often provide percentage ranks, exemplified by the SAT and ACT scores. Standardized testing is vital in the American education system, particularly in high school, with many students taking the SAT or ACT by grade 11. The high school graduating class of 201 was notably tested, with growing numbers in recent years. The updated California STAR Program dedicates two weeks in junior year to course-based testing. Each test type comes with benefits and limitations. A key benefit of summative assessments lies in their role in high-stakes decisions, where test score validity is paramount. Distinguishing between legitimate test preparation and exam irregularities poses challenges. Studies indicate disparities in cheating tendencies between students of different backgrounds [5, 6].

Purpose of Standardized Testing

Standardized testing serves several primary purposes, mainly conducted through computer or paper formats. It evaluates individual or group academic achievement, contrasting norm-referenced evaluations that grade larger populations. These tests aim to assess knowledge, practical skills, structure, and problem-solving abilities. In many Western countries, standardized testing influences college admissions, while in English-speaking nations and France, its focus is on secondary and tertiary education. Conversely, IRT is utilized in China, Asia, and parts of Africa to gauge preschool readiness, showcasing a regional variation in testing approaches. A significant aim of standardized testing is to gauge readiness for extensive educational programs. The Kentucky State School, for instance, develops comprehensive tests to balance student performance across the state. Following marijuana legalization, the Department of Education (DOE) has fostered funding opportunities tied to US monopolies in exchange for grants. However, there are psychometric concerns; research links test intent with engagement issues, affecting accountability measures’ validity. Continued flawed assessments could exacerbate existing educational disparities in the US. Standardized testing, combined with the accountability system, poses challenges, particularly for disadvantaged institutions which bear the brunt of these evaluations. The DOE should reconsider its rigid approach and focus on addressing funding discrepancies instead of hindering the learning process with a punitive standardized testing structure. The research suggests the DOE needs to pause its expedited projects, including the Kentucky School Project, to foster more academically beneficial environments for pre-university students in the US [7, 8].

Benefits of Standardized Testing

Standardized testing is more commonly used in grades 3, 5, 8, and 10 and the results provide the district with accurate, reliable, and meaningful information about the student and/or class performance because they are congruent with the state administered standard based assessments. In Alaska, both district and state assessment results are compared. One of the main benefits of standardized testing is that standardized tests are designed, administered, and scored in a consistent or “standard” manner. This provides a universal metric by which student achievement can be gauged as well as shared. The results reveal the deficiency in mathematics. Similar gaps or weaknesses may be present in 5th and 8th grade. Achievement gaps are also revealed when statistics are disaggregated by ethnicity. The use of standardized assessments is here to stay and in a growing controversy educationally speaking, particularly in Alaska, where high stakes exit exams are a high priority in this large school district. Standardized tests are able to identify what a child actually knows. Remember that, in contrast to classroom tests, standardized tests are not affected by the particular technological competence of the teacher. The study found that many opponents to standardized testing believe that results show they do not increase student performance. The study found that test preparation for standardized tests can increase student knowledge as well as skill and the highest score increases were seen in low-performing students. It is well known in education circles that what gets assessed gets looked at and attended to closely. “And when assessment results are tied to high stakes, the interest in getting the desired results is only heightened.” Well-designed standardized tests of the achievement of students can help teachers evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching. When standardized tests are well designed, they can generate enough detail about what students know and can do to provide specific direction that teachers can use to improve instruction. This kind of testing situation often also results in a clear improvement in student examination results [9, 10].

Critiques of Standardized Testing

For many students and parents, K-12 education aims at college preparation, heavily influenced by standardized tests. Most research on educational assessment examines the technical aspects, such as whether the SAT predicts freshman GPA. However, this overlooks social and educational critiques of standardized testing. One major criticism is that these tests assess test-taking skills rather than actual knowledge or critical thinking. Many standardized tests are multiple choice, rewarding those who understand the format, as strategies like avoiding repeated answers can improve scores. This test-taking savvy is often unaddressed in college prep programs, leading to questions about their validity. Additionally, many argue that these tests are biased and culturally irrelevant. The tests often reflect a narrow cultural literacy tied to classical subjects rather than contemporary issues. Thus, the critique of standardized testing centers on their effectiveness and relevance, rather than moral evaluations of assessment [11, 12, 13, 14].

Impact on Curriculum

Proudly displayed in the main lobby of many schools, the trophy case features a prized model of student achievement. Among plaques celebrating student athletic prowess are one or more vying for the most improved student standardized test scores. Educators are rewarded for substantial year-to-year gains and that improvement is a direct reflection of implementing curriculum based on the actual items that will be on the test. Not surprisingly, those items match the tests for which students need be prepared. However, standardized tests have had the unintended consequence of draining money and time from schools' broader educational mission, entrusting a large part of the curriculum, which forms the basis for these improved test scores. It's been 20 years since major mandates tied high-stakes testing to school funding. While the law's intent was to improve school quality and accountability, not all its consequences have been positive. Schools with poor performance were pressured to generate higher scores, tens of millions outside the educational system were spent on products and services to achieve this, and the stakes placed on the evaluations have only continued to grow. The law's funding contingencies have put schools in a worldwide competition, with under-resourced schools lacking an even playing field. Accountability evaluations have been tied to increased use of standardized tests, diverting money from other areas, such as technology, school upkeep, libraries, and the arts instead spent on materials catering directly to test preparation and instruction. Tying standardized testing scores to teacher evaluations has negatively impacted instruction. Relying on test results to judge teacher performance has replaced a holistic understanding of student learning processes. The resulting pressure to produce higher scores has led to a decrease in interdisciplinary teaching in schools. Moreover, public fear that educators are “teaching to the test” leads to stressed-out students and a sense that learning and grades are about regurgitation rather than understanding [15, 16].

Standardized Testing and Equity

There is a critical link between standardized testing and educational equity disparities in the U.S. education system. These tests are often criticized for exacerbating existing inequalities, serving to uphold established goals rather than foster equal academic opportunities. Transfer students frequently lack the necessary resources and support to excel in exams essential for advanced placements, highlighting a disconnect between what is taught and what is assessed. While individualized testing accommodations exist, they may lead to students being labeled as cognitively disabled, raising concerns about the potential hindrance to their growth. Addressing these challenges is crucial for educators to create equitable opportunities for all. Standardized testing leads to inequity, as equally talented students may be excluded from certain institutions based on unfair rankings, which limits their academic and career success. Research shows that additional resources can boost performance on these tests, with students receiving outside support generally outperforming their peers. As the primary method for credentialing, standardized tests govern educational equality in the U.S. When programs aim to enhance performance in lower quartile schools, they often yield lesser benefits than necessary, while middle quartile schools see minimal improvements, resulting in significant funding cuts for those in decline. Alternatives to standardized testing could bridge disparities, especially if federal policy changes support state implementation of their own SAT prep and practice exams, as initiated by the College Board in 2016. Such an initiative could provide equitable educational investments and mitigate the advantages of elite programs. However, opportunities for states to secure additional desegregated funding have reduced due to changes in federal policies [17, 18].

Testing Accommodations for Students with Disabilities

Testing Accommodations for Students with Disabilities Since the No Child Left Behind Act's implementation in 2002, standardized testing's role in public schools has become increasingly contentious. Schools dedicate substantial time and resources to testing, but providing necessary support for students with disabilities remains problematic due to varying state policies and federal accountability demands. For over five years, I observed accommodations from three perspectives: as a high school student, as a teacher's assistant in an Elementary Special Education summer school class, and through assisting three special education high school students outside school to prep for high-stakes tests and advocate for necessary accommodations. The Individualized Education Program (IEP), mandated by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, outlines the learning needs and required modifications for those under 21 with disabilities. While the IDEA necessitates an IEP, not all individual modifications apply to standardized tests under certain laws. Accurate information about testing accommodations is vital for parents and professionals. After reviewing the content, readers should understand common accommodation types, eligibility, NCLB testing mandates, and the perceived impacts on students with and without disabilities [19, 20].

The Role of Technology in Testing

Technology is changing all over. Phones, cars, even swimming pools get new technology every day. Without technology, many things in today's world might not be here. One thing technology has changed in the last 10 years is testing. In the 80s and 90s, taking a test meant filling in bubbles with a pencil. After everyone had turned in his or her tests, they would be sent off to a warehouse to be graded and the grades would come back two weeks to a month later. Today, students just have to take the test on a computer and the scores come out within a day. But what kind of tests do schools use today and how do they compare to tests that schools used to use? Paper-based assessments have been the norm for standardized tests in public schools since the turn of the 20th century. There has only been one major change to this methodology, which was made in the late 90s and early 2000s. However, due to advancements in technology over about the last 10 years, a transformation in testing practices has begun to take place. The most recent change that was made to tests was when they were made to be multiple choice. Now, with the digital format of testing becoming mainstream, administering and scoring the tests themselves can be done more efficiently. The technology does the grading and the results can be made available in a much faster time to the educator. With these facts, there are many benefits to using the digital format for testing. One of the most beneficial gains is the ability to receive and analyze the results of the tests much faster than before. There is the potential to give immediate feedback to the student once they have finished the test. The availability to test online and have virtual tests also means that ambiguous questions or potential errors in tests can be fixed immediately. Generally, the testing environment is much more accessible with digital formats. Students have many more resources and tools available to them digitally than they would with a piece of paper. However, there are several concerns that come

along with the use of this new technology for testing. Processors that are able to send and transmit data about the test to another location are located inside many handheld devices that are taken to schools every day by students. This fact enables the possibility of many potential students cheating the system. Securing a test delivered digitally is a much harder task than securing a paper test. Along with this idea is the privacy issues that come along with data and the transferring of data between parties. There are many benefits and issues that come along with testing in the digital format. However, one area where digital formats are severely lacking is in the creativeness that can be done for certain test items. Since the beginning of testing in the early 20th century, standardized testing solely has been writing a response, followed by more narrow options than what is present in the item itself [21, 22].

Case Studies of Standardized Testing Outcomes

Outcomes related to standardized testing have been studied through case studies in various educational settings where testing became vital. These narratives illustrate specific scenarios of testing implementation, results, and their effects on students and policies. The role of test preparation and high-stakes testing is emphasized, alongside analyzing standardized tests and classroom assessments. Comparative analysis across different programs is explored, highlighting significant impacts on curriculum and teaching strategies. The first case study took place in a rural school in the Southwest, revealing changes in a well-funded federal program. Due to poor initial student performance, teachers replaced certain texts with weekly write-up tasks and engaging activities focused on test formats. Morning classroom time was dedicated to core subjects, and older students partnered with younger ones to play test-related games every Friday. However, during the Christmas vacation, deregulation impacted the school's funding, leading to the denial of a provisional deregulation application. Consequently, the grant was withdrawn, forcing the school off reservation funds. The second case study, set in another Southwest rural district, noted a rise in standardized test scores linked to a comprehensive exam. To improve rankings, only score-enhancing courses were offered, which sparked community unrest. One math teacher faced challenges with failing classes under a new program. To counteract declining scores, a strategy was implemented where students received tutoring on sentence identification. Although mostly teachers tutored, external Educational Services staff also participated. With this tutoring, the district's test scores improved by almost 40 points but still fell 30 points below the state average. After three years, the program was discontinued, and shares were sold to a managing corporation [23, 24].

International Perspectives on Standardized Testing

An investigation of the role of standardized testing in public education can greatly benefit from looking beyond the practices of North America. To better understand the place of standardized tests in contemporary educational systems, it is important to investigate how they are perceived and utilized across the world. A specific comparison of standardized testing in the United States and China offers an important perspective on global parallels and differences. However, in a wider, global scenario, these two countries are but a small fraction of a vast spectrum of various approaches to testing in education worldwide. To better illustrate both the diversity and universality of the testing panorama in different parts of the world, a look is taken at a range of countries — developed, developing, and transitional economies, each with different histories and cultural traditions; and each with its unique approach to assessment and education [25]. When exploring alternative testing philosophies and practices, both differences and similarities in objectives and methodologies stand out. The concern with tests as an embodiment of cultural preoccupations emerges. While cultural influences may concern the methods of assessment, it can also extend to the very notion of education and its role in society. The international success of the PISA is analyzed and its implications for national educational policies debated. Despite obvious differences between education systems, a common trend toward the central role of assessment as a policy lever is observed in most countries. Directly or indirectly, in developed or developing environments, all countries appear to be influenced, pressured, or inspired by some standardized testing procedure adopted elsewhere in the world. A more general reflection is offered on the potential for alternative models based on the complex cultural heritage of education systems worldwide [26].

The Future of Standardized Testing

John Hellermann initiated his discussion on language testing by questioning why people fear such assessments. This inquiry is timely due to increased public scrutiny and accountability regarding education. Language tests are pivotal in educational debates on values, measurement, and evaluation systems. In the U.S., critics of education reform should continue asking essential questions: What are the induction goals? How do we assess the completion of reform? What is the impact of high-stakes testing in public education? How is equity defined and measured? What value do high standards and accountability hold? Those satisfied with induction may not express their views openly. Recent efforts to gather

signatures from U.S. high school teachers against high-stakes graduation exams highlight the significance of public opinion and the need for discussions on conscientious noncompliance [27, 28].

Alternatives To Standardized Testing

Many educators, policymakers, and the public argue against reliance on standardized testing for evaluating student learning, suggesting alternative methods may be more effective. Options like portfolio assessments, project-based learning (PBL), and performance assessments offer better insights into students as well-rounded learners, though each has limitations. Portfolio assessments enable students to showcase critical thinking through a collection of work, capturing abilities beyond standardized tests. They reflect students' approaches and work ethic, essential for future endeavors. PBL focuses on projects and real-life scenarios relevant to students' careers, benefiting both advanced and struggling learners. This hands-on approach helps kinesthetic learners who may struggle with traditional lectures. However, PBL can be time-consuming and often lacks resources in schools. Performance assessments gauge a student's abilities across tasks, requiring knowledge application and reasoning. While these assessments measure performance, they are time-intensive to create, costly, and difficult to standardize. They should not be the sole evaluation method and must be combined with others. The American education system faces pressure for accountability through standardized scores. Critics highlight high-stakes testing's drawbacks, advocating for alternatives that genuinely measure student growth. The article reviews literature on portfolio and performance assessments, promoting their wider exploration to support diverse student capabilities, and emphasizes the importance of integrating alternative assessments into educational practices and policies [29, 30, 31].

CONCLUSION

Standardized testing remains a pivotal yet contentious element of public education. While these assessments provide valuable data for evaluating student learning and institutional performance, they also present significant challenges, including curriculum narrowing, increased student stress, and inequities in educational opportunities. The role of standardized testing should evolve to incorporate more holistic assessment methods that emphasize critical thinking, creativity, and real-world problem-solving skills. Policymakers must reconsider the reliance on high-stakes testing and explore alternative approaches that prioritize student learning over mere performance metrics. A balanced integration of standardized assessments with comprehensive evaluations can create a more equitable and effective education system for all students.

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