

**Standardized Tests Role in the Academic Lives of Students and Teachers**

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### **Abstract**

American educators and students are greatly impacted by standardized tests in their academic lives. Standardized tests are a growing issue in public schools due to low scores, school sanctions, curriculum changes, and increased pressure on students and teachers. Research suggests that teachers may feel obligated to change their instructional patterns to prepare students for standardized tests. Students are spending much of their instructional time learning memorization and test-taking strategies. Test scores are being used to evaluate both students and teachers. However, research shows that standardized test scores may not be able to sufficiently measure students' full capability in the classroom and may be a poor representation of teacher effectiveness. This paper aims to determine that standardized tests are not a fair and accurate representation of a student's progress and achievement. Further recommendations include observing, understanding, and learning from teachers personal experience with standardized testing in their classroom as well as giving students a voice to advocate for themselves. The solution may not include removing standardized tests from public education. Yet, it may include finding alternatives in addition to test scores in order to measure and evaluate student and teacher success.

## **Introduction**

Across the United States, federal law has mandated standardized tests as annual exams in elementary school classrooms (Szolowicz, 2020). Time that is allotted for test taking not only takes time away from direct instruction, but also may influence teachers' curriculum to teach to the test (Berwick, 2019; Morgan, 2016). Both students and teachers are heavily evaluated based on standardized test scores which has been suggested to contribute to less direct educational time spent on non-tested subjects, and a tendency for teachers to shape curriculum towards the standardized test, rather than to the students in their classroom (Berwick, 2019; Morgan, 2016; Stefanko, 2021). Since teachers are being heavily evaluated by their student's scores, they are more likely to adapt their teaching style to the testing format (Blazer, 2011). When teaching in this manner, teachers cannot attend to students' creativity (Morgan, 2016). Students are not learning any enjoyable material and are lacking motivation in the classroom which may cause boredom and burnout (Blazer, 2011; Morgan, 2016). This form of instruction leaves few opportunities for students to make progress, especially those of low socioeconomic status (Morgan, 2016). This has become a controversial issue among teachers, parents, and students at the elementary level (Morgan, 2016).

Each year, an increasing number of parents are choosing to opt their children out of mandated standardized achievement tests for a multitude of reasons such as unnecessary stress drawn upon their children (Chen, 2021). In the Spring of 2015, twenty percent of students in New York State opted out of mandated standardized tests (Strauss, 2015). It has been suggested that students may suffer from increased pressure and anxiety related to standardized testing (Felton & Akos, 2011). When elementary students are first introduced to standardized tests, they lack familiarity with content expectations of the exam which can cause underperformance and an

inaccurate portrayal of students' abilities (Felton & Akos, 2011; Morgan, 2016; Stefanko, 2021). Underperforming can negatively affect teachers as well. Teachers face an enormous load of pressure to increase students' scores. This creates a learning environment based on memorization and can lead to a reduction in learning (Bhattacharyya et Al.,2013; Morgan, 2016). Teachers can also be wrongly evaluated because of their students' low test scores (Morgan, 2016).

The use of standardized testing in the elementary classroom has contributed to a negative environment for students' learning and the instructor's method of teaching (Morgan, 2016). Research has shown that teachers feel that the joy of teaching is being taken away from them and students are suffering from this as well (Morgan, 2016). After the No Child Left Behind Act was passed in 2002, teachers have struggled with how they choose to teach their students (Gibbs, 2020). Educators are being told that they must "teach for the test" (Stefanko, 202; Barrenechea, 2018). Many teachers have reported going against their own teaching beliefs while teaching students test-taking strategies and test preparation rather than skills that may better contribute to lifelong learning (Stefanko, 2021). Teachers are forced to choose between engaging curriculum or preparing their students for standardized tests that will jeopardize both the student and their own future (Gibbs, 2020).

Doss (2021) has suggested that students are spending too much time in the classroom preparing for standardized tests rather than learning content relevant to their age group and subject matter. When preparing for exams, teachers can experience burnout which can lead to further negative impacts on students in their classrooms such as being unable to satisfy the learning needs of their students (Barrenechea, 2018). From problems identified in the research, and a perceived lack of support for teachers, educators and students around the United States are

feeling the negative effects that standardized tests bring into the classroom in a very impactful way (Stefanko, 2021).

### **History of Standardized Tests**

Standardized tests became mandatory across the United States to hold schools and teachers accountable while tracking students progress (Stefanko, 2021). These exams have had a direct impact on American education, students, and teachers. Although standardized tests have recently gained their increased negative popularity, they have been a part of American education since the mid-1800s (History of Standardized Tests, 2020). Horace Mann and Samuel Gridley Howe played a major role in the introduction of standardized tests in Boston, Massachusetts schools (History of Standardized Tests, 2020). Mann and Howe focused their efforts on the Prussian school system and wanted to bring their techniques into the United States by using standardized tests (History of Standardized Tests, 2020). The use of standardized tests at this time in the mid-1800s was to compare schools and gain objective information about teacher quality (History of Standardized Tests, 2020). As well, the tests were used as a tool to measure achievement and learning of students (Brooks & Shelton, 2019). The contemporary system in Boston was soon adopted by schools nationwide (History of Standardized Tests, 2020). The use of standardized tests increased significantly in the 1900s. By 1917, standardized tests were used regularly nationwide in public schools (Brooks & Shelton, 2019).

The testing movement that today's education system faces began with the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), enacted by President Lyndon Johnson in 1965 (History of Standardized Tests, 2020). This act included testing and accountability provisions in an effort to raise standards and make education more equitable (History of Standardized Tests, 2020). The No Child Left Behind Act introduced during the Bush administration has had the most profound

effect on American education and standardized testing. The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 dramatically increased the prevalence of standardized testing at the elementary, middle, and high school level for students in public schools across the nation (Segool & others, 2013). After the NCLB (No Child Left Behind) Act was signed into law by President George W. Bush in 2002, the age of accountability was introduced into American education (Gibbs, 2020).

After the NCLB Act was passed, annual testing nationwide is now required in all public schools. Students are tested with academic achievement tests in math and reading beginning in third grade through high school (Segool et Al., 2013). NCLB requires schools to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) target goals for their student's performance each year and test scores are publicly reported (Gibbs, 2020; Segool et Al., 2013). Scores can lead to rewards and sanctions, such as school funding, administration, and employment decisions (Segool et Al., 2013). Under the NCLB act, there is a serious emphasis on penalizing schools and students for low performance, therefore creating an environment that may be troubling for both teachers and students (Cunningham, 2019). Although the act was signed into law to benefit America's education system, research has shown clear evidence that since the No Child Left Behind Act was implemented, more students have been harmed than benefited and the education system has seen devastation (Stefanko, 2021).

### **Criticisms of Standardized Tests**

Teachers, parents, and students have expressed concerns about standardized testing in public schools. Although this is a fairly new addressed issue in American education, concerns about excessive standardized testing were voiced as early as 1906 (History of Standardized Tests, 2020). The New York State Department of Education advised the state legislature that "it is a very great and more serious evil to sacrifice systematic instruction and a comprehensive view of

the subject for the scrappy and unrelated knowledge gained by students who are persistently drilled in the mere answering of questions issued by the Education Department or other governing bodies (History of Standardized Tests, 2020).”

High-stakes achievement tests have the most controversial reputation of all standardized tests given to students in the United States. These assessments implement important consequences on students, teachers and schools (History of Standardized Tests, 2020). Students' test scores are heavily evaluated and can cause significant changes in the students academic life. If students receive low test scores, this can prevent them from progressing to the next grade level (History of Standardized Tests, 2020). However, testing can be an inaccurate representation of students' abilities since there are many different factors that can contribute to students' test scores (Stefanko, 2021).

The most common criticism of standardized testing is “teaching to the test.” Teachers find themselves “teaching for the test” instead of teaching the various content and skill areas of the curriculum (Bhattacharyya et Al., 2013). The changes to curriculum taught in classrooms has been a problem since the onset of standardized testing. Standardized tests are based on curriculum that may not be relevant to the material students are learning in the classroom (Walker, 2016). A survey was conducted with more than 1500 National Education Associate members who teach students that are required to be tested under the NCLB act (Walker, 2016). The survey results show that a large majority of educators, specifically 70 percent, do not believe that state required exams are developed appropriately for their students (Walker, 2016). Only 13 percent of the participants agreed with the statement that the NCLB-required state standardized tests met that standard (Walker, 2016).

Research shows that standards and curriculum that are taught to students in the classroom do not always align with test questions (Gibbs, 2020). Classrooms have shifted from learning content, ideas, and skills to learning how to take a standardized test (Stefanko, 2021). In the classroom, there is a significant amount of time devoted to test preparation and benchmark tests (Stefanko, 2021). This focus on “teaching for the test” creates less of a focus on curriculum and skill mastery that will benefit the student’s learning (Stefanko, 2021). The tests narrow down the curriculum to those bits that can be captured on a bubble sheet or in a short essay and cannot measure all that students learn (Miller, 2013). The tests may possibly ignore the greatest parts of their learning (Stefanko, 2021). “Teaching for the test” only improves their test performance, not the important aspects of learning that teachers are consistently working on with their students (Stefanko, 2021). According to Miller (2013) and Cunningham (2019), if standardized tests are good at anything, it’s measuring the achievement gap. When teachers drill students with test taking and memorization strategies, students' scores may improve but they often fail to develop higher level thinking skills (Morgan, 2016). When relying solely on memorization, the students may not be able to apply their skills to content other than material on the test (Morgan, 2016).

Despite the dedication to test preparation in classrooms, student test scores have not increased (Shelton & Brooks, 2019). Teachers are at risk if students are scoring low on exams. Low scores can lead to teacher layoffs and school closures, while high scores ensure continued federal and local funding that is used to reward teachers and administrators with bonus payments (History of Standardized Tests, 2020). Schools that are failing are punished with less funding to help students that may need it the most. Testing companies are making billions of dollars while schools are suffering and losing funding when students are not showing proficiency (Stefanko,

2021). In conclusion, standardized tests are not a sufficient way to judge student or teacher success (Walker, 2016).

### **Impact of Standardized Testing-Student Lens**

Standardized testing is a task that all students must undertake during their educational careers. This creates a school year in which most time may be devoted to test preparation, practice tests, benchmark tests, and other ways for schools to predict how students will score (Stefanko, 2021). Research shows that students spend a fair amount of time taking standardized tests (Strauss, 2015). According to Strauss (2015), students spend about twenty-five hours in one school year taking mandatory standardized tests which is equivalent to four to five school days per year. It is also known that testing often occurs in the second half of the school year. Strauss (2015) describes the second half of a child's school year as "one long test" given the hours spent in actual testing and direct instruction time dedicated to preparing for the test (p. 3). The time and effort that students spend preparing for standardized tests is not only time-consuming, but takes away from lifelong learning in the classroom (Zoch, 2015).

Research has found that minority students suffer the most from standardized testing in the classroom (Gard, 2020). Students from stressful neighborhoods and home lives, with lower incomes and more incidents of violence, are most negatively affected (Gard, 2020). These students are often faced with an even larger setback while test-taking; English is not their first language which intensifies the impact of standardized tests on minority students (Barrenechea, 2018). Therefore, it was very clear that standardized tests impact students' lives negatively, and that the impact is far greater for students of lower socioeconomic status and non-English speaking students (Barrenechea, 2018).

Standardized tests are biased against students of color (Cunningham, 2019). Standardized tests have marginalized low-income students and students of color since their introduction to American education (Cunningham, 2019). Students of color are the lowest performers on standardized tests and therefore are heavily penalized (Cunningham, 2019; Brooks & Shelton, 2019). According to Cunningham (2019), marginalization will continue as long as schools heavily rely on standardized tests as measures of student intelligence and success. Minority students, those with limited English language skills, and students with learning disabilities suffer the most as a result of high-stakes testing (Bhattacharyya et Al., 2013). There are many reasons for this disadvantage such as test-takers being unable to ask questions of clarification like they usually can on classroom tests (Cunningham, 2019). Students must independently complete their answer sheets, even if there is confusion or questions lingering (Cunningham, 2019). This concludes that in order for students to perform well on standardized tests, the student must master silently sitting at a desk for an extended period of time, and reading and correctly filling out an answer sheet (Cunningham, 2019). These tasks have little to do with content being learned in their everyday classroom and more to do with the test-taking procedure (Cunningham, 2019).

### ***Curriculum Changes from Direct Instruction***

The negative impact of standardized testing on direct education time is especially prevalent in schools that serve primarily lower socioeconomic communities (Cunningham, 2019; Morgan, 2016; Zoch, 2015). Zoch (2015) describes the standardized testing educational environment as "decontextualized", with curriculum focused on preparing for the testing experience, relying on singular methods of instruction such as multiple-choice assessment, and less time on non-tested content (p. 5). Curriculum is being narrowed and non-tested subject areas and topics are being excluded (Blazer, 2011). Teaching students specific testing standards in

order for them to choose the correct multiple-choice answer on a test is not the way to teach students to become lifelong learners (Stefanko, 2021). Unfortunately, this is the reality for many students across the United States that must take NCLB mandatory annual exams.

Teaching to the test has been the strategy for many schools to avoid penalties for low test scores (Stefanko, 2021). Schools are teaching students how to pass standardized tests, instead of a valuable and grade-appropriate curriculum. Test preparation only improves a student's ability to take a test; it does not improve their learning (Stefanko, 2021). Math and reading turn into the focus of classroom instruction because those are the subjects most heavily tested on standardized exams (Stefanko, 2021). Therefore, other subjects such as history, the arts, and geography are often neglected during the school year since students are not tested on those subjects every year (Stefanko, 2021). Stefanko (2021) suggests that teaching for the test can cause students to not be engaged in the content they are being taught. Students are not learning skills to help them become successful adults when they are reviewing test preparation problems in class (Stefanko, 2021).

### ***Testing Anxiety***

Standardized tests play a large role in determining a student's academic future. It is very important that all students who take these exams have an equal opportunity to succeed on standardized tests. However, bias, stress, and anxiety in standardized testing often hinders this opportunity for many students (Gard, 2020). Under these conditions, students cannot perform well (Gard, 2020). Every student in the classroom is different. Yet, they all take the same high-stakes, standardized achievement test. It is difficult to determine a student's academic progress and achievement based on a test (Blazer, 2011). Doss (2021) claims that standardized tests merely measure materials learned. However, it is expected that every student must perform

well on a single test, regardless of race, socioeconomic status, location, ability or intelligence level (Doss, 2021). Doss (2021) explains that Americans live in a society that values being unique and different, yet all students are expected to perform well on the same test. Students may not be aware of the prevalence of standardized test bias (Doss, 2021). However, students know how they feel during testing. Test anxiety and stress can be an upsetting and a disruptive factor for students taking standardized tests (Gard, 2020).

Reports have shown that students have significantly high levels of test anxiety on state testing compared to their classroom tests (Stefanko, 2021). Blazer (2011) states that 20%-33% of all students experience standardized test anxiety, which is more prevalent in females (p. 5). Test anxiety can interfere with students ability to function while test-taking (Blazer, 2011). Blazer (2011) explains that students can be physiologically affected and experience an increase in blood pressure, headaches, and difficulty sleeping. Test anxiety has also been associated with low academic performance in students. Students develop academic avoidance behaviors and develop poor study skills (Blazer, 2011). Test anxiety can cause students to test differently (Stefanko, 2021). Research shows that students who struggle the most with standardized tests and testing anxiety are students of lower socioeconomic status (Barrenechea, 2018).

A study was conducted to explore the differences in test anxiety on high-stakes standardized achievement tests and low-stakes tests among elementary school students (Segool et Al., 2013). The research states, “Test anxiety comprises psychological, physiological, and behavioral reactions that occur in association with concern about the negative outcomes resulting from failure or poor performance in evaluative situations (Segool et Al.,2013 p. 1).” The purpose of this study was to critically examine how elementary school children perceive high-stakes testing situations (Segool et Al., 2013). There were three hundred thirty-five students in the study

in Grades 3 through 5. The researchers completed assessments on the students after taking NCLB tests and typical tests in the classroom setting (Segool et Al., 2013). The study found that students reported more overall test anxiety during high-stakes exams (Segool et Al., 2013).

### ***Effects of Student Test Scores***

As school students begin taking standardized tests, they learn that test scores are used as the primary determinant for placement in classes, programs, promotion from grade to grade, and for high school graduation (Miller, 2013). When students do not pass standardized tests, schools are penalized (Stefanko, 2021). States will cut funding for schools that do not meet the test score criteria (Stefanko, 2021). Schools with low test scores are punished when their students are the ones who need the most attention, help, and resources. When analyzing test scores, schools generally do not take into consideration how the test taker performed under certain testing conditions or how they prepared for the exam (Stefanko, 2021). The test scores can be used to evaluate whether or not the student reached a specific level of achievement (Stefanko, 2021). Although schools evaluate scores very seriously, research has suggested that student test scores are not always an accurate representation of what a student is capable of (Stefanko, 2021). Test scores may display a limited sample of students' knowledge (Blazer, 2011). Standardized tests can not measure all academic skills that students learn in school (Stefanko, 2021).

Stefanko (2021) explains that standardized test scores are becoming a poor measure of students' understanding of subject matter. Rather, test scores record a student's ability to understand the meaning of the test directions (Stefanko, 2021). Stefanko (2021) suggests there are many factors that can influence a student's score such as test environment, test preparation, first language, learning disability, or test anxiety. Relying solely on test scores can be an

inaccurate representation of student growth, achievement, and true abilities in the classroom (Stefanko, 2021; Bhattacharyya et Al.,2013).

### **Impact of Standardized Tests-Teacher Lens**

Teachers are directly affected by the negative impacts of mandatory standardized tests in their classrooms (Brooks & Shelton, 2019). Standardized testing was not designed to measure teacher effectiveness, but tests are now being used in this way (Stefanko, 2021). Test scores are closely tied to teacher evaluations which causes high levels of stress for hard-working teachers in America (Brooks & Shelton, 2019). Research suggests that state testing programs have resulted in increased job stress and lowered job satisfaction for teachers (Segool et Al., 2013). In the study presented by Segool et Al (2013), teachers were more likely to worry about how well their students will perform on high-stakes tests and less likely to worry about regular classroom tests. As a consequence of standardized tests being highly important, teachers may feel that it is necessary to align their instruction with the test and teach students more test preparation skills (Stefanko, 2021). Teachers explain that testing can limit their opportunity to be innovative and creative (Brooks & Shelton, 2018). Brooks & Shelton (2019) explain that teachers feel that standardized tests heavily affect their teaching experience and choices in the classroom (Brooks & Shelton, 2019). Stefanko (2021) states that a significant number of elementary school teachers have expressed concern that standardized tests have caused them to teach in ways that contradict their own educational philosophies and disputes their own ideas of quality instructional practices for their students (Stefanko, 2021).

### ***Increased Pressure on Teachers***

Schools place an enormous amount of pressure on teachers for standardized tests because they fear low test scores will cause negative sanctions (Stefanko, 2021). Pressure from school

officials causes teachers to feel constrained to teach their students for the test and begin to spend far more time completing test preparation practice rather than providing opportunities for authentic learning (Stefanko, 2021). Teachers may begin to neglect valuable teaching skills and subjects for the benefit of increased student test scores (Stefanko, 2021). Standardized tests affect teachers' teaching strategies and educational experiences in various ways (Stefanko, 2021). Teachers are pressured to meet state-mandated standards. This becomes a struggle because they must also accommodate to their diverse and multilingual student populations (Barrenechea, 2018). While each student has different needs, teachers have to prepare students for the same standardized tests that they all must take (Barrenechea, 2018). For example, teachers have to focus on explaining to their diverse group of students how to mark correct answers for multiple-choice questions (Barrenechea, 2018). Teachers also spend time going over practice questions from previous tests in recent years (Barrenechea, 2018). This will help students to be familiar with test content when the time comes to take the standardized tests.

In an interview done by Barrenechea (2018), a teacher explained that she felt very constrained when not being able to teach students the skills she felt they needed. Instead, she taught for the test. The teacher told Barrenechea a story about a student in her class who was learning English as a second language. The teacher stated, "I had to lie to her, I had to tell her it was not important... and it was important (Barrenechea, 2018 p. 13)." Teachers are deeply affected by the way standardized tests can take over their classroom procedures. Research shows that many teachers decide to quit their public-school teaching job (Stefanko, 2021). These teachers may begin to teach at a private school or leave the profession entirely to avoid the negative consequences and pressure associated with standardized testing (Stefanko, 2021).

Teachers experience exhaustion and stress alongside their students on a daily basis (Brooks & Shelton, 2019). However, many states continue to use students' test scores to evaluate their teachers (Stefanko, 2021). They use students' scores to indicate whether or not they are effective teachers (Stefanko, 2021). Teachers are constantly aware of the threat that they may lose their jobs over test scores (Brooks & Shelton, 2019). Teachers understand the clear message from school districts and officials that they are expected to teach specifically for the tests, or they can be terminated (Brooks & Shelton, 2019).

### **Further Recommendations**

Given all of the negative impacts that both students and teachers are feeling from standardized tests, it is time for change. Improving the current system does not necessarily mean eliminating the use of standardized tests (Morgan, 2016). Change can include not implementing these tests as their main method of assessing teachers (Morgan, 2016). Instead, combine test scores with other forms of evaluation (Morgan, 2016). Districts and administrations must attempt to understand teachers' experiences in their own classrooms in order to find a better way to evaluate teachers (Barrenechea, 2018). Teachers' opinions and concerns should be taken very seriously in formulating educational policies (Bhattacharyya et Al., 2013).

Students are more than just a test score and their ability cannot be shown simply from a standardized test (Doss, 2021). Student assessment should include various forms of testing, class projects, self-reflections, research assignments, demonstrations, and displays (Bhattacharyya et Al., 2013). Students' voices need to be heard. Students need to be able to tell lawmakers and policymakers the changes that need to be made (Gard, 2020). When students are given a voice, they can be advocates for themselves which will lead to significant change in the future (Gard, 2020). Schools need to make an effort to create an environment for their students that exposes

them to different ways of learning and approaching problems (Gard, 2020). Students need to be given the power to create their own ideas in order for them to feel empowered (Gard, 2020). If students are in a school environment in which they feel appreciated and supported, they will feel more connected to their school community (Gard, 2020). Students are the future and they each deserve to have equal opportunities to succeed. No student deserves to be at a disadvantage (Gard, 2020).

### **Conclusion**

States, districts, and schools are failing to recognize and give help to students and teachers who are being negatively impacted by standardized tests. The No Child Left Behind Act has caused the age of accountability to take over classroom curriculum. The increased amount of classroom time that may be dedicated to test preparation is negatively affecting students and teachers across the country. Teachers are heavily evaluated by student test scores, therefore, creating a shift from direct instruction to test preparation. Students are not being exposed to diverse curriculum while being taught for the test. Classrooms may spend their time working on test preparation instead of authentic learning experiences. Standardized testing has led to many negative consequences for teachers and students in the classroom due to teacher restrictions, student test anxiety, and teaching to the test.

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