

# Standardized tests: the epidemic across the world



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## **Abstract**

Standardized testing is a constant topic of debate among educators all over the world. They are required in every single school among many different grades, but that doesn't necessarily mean they are a good idea, as will be expressed throughout my paper. First, I will discuss some of the most talked about issues regarding this topic. Then, I will focus on how teachers tend to feel about these tests followed by the students, each of which will be focused on specific research and studies gathered about their effects. Next, alternatives to these assessments will be conveyed, followed by an argument posed for some of the positives regarding standardized tests. These tests have created long-standing frustrations, annoyance, and faults within parts of the educational system, and that will be the overarching theme discussed throughout my paper.

### Standardized Tests: The Epidemic Across the World

The definition of a standardized test is a test requiring all students to answer the same series of questions that are then scored in a consistent/standard manner. This makes it easier to compare individual performances within the school, the nation, and the world (Great Schools Partnership, 2015). First beginning in 1838 by a group of American educators, these types of tests have been administered in the United States for about 180 years. It has transformed a great deal since the 1800s, but it wasn't until the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 that it developed to the point that it has in our world today. Standardized tests present a huge dilemma for educators across the world who disagree with its usage because they are required

nation/worldwide tests, yet they tend to fall short in appropriately interpreting student achievement in school.

### Common Arguments Against Standardized Tests

A frequent argument against standardized tests are that they are not true measures of a student's knowledge. They focus on student achievement in subjects such as math, reading, and science, but what about students who excel in art and music, or who just don't test well at all because of the stress and pressure it brings? These tests limit a student's learning, they limit a student's creativity, and they limit a student's ability to share their voice through their work. "[A]lthough we need to test certain competencies and intelligence, it is becoming quite clear that there are many kinds of competencies and many forms of intelligence that we are not picking up on with our current testing approaches" (Busteed, 2013, para. 5). Furthermore, Brandon Busteed, executive director of the Gallup Education, continued to express his disappointment that standardized tests eliminate any sort of variation among the student's work. These tests all require one correct answer, often leaving no room for debate or explanation. By doing so, they are forcing all students into the same box, requiring them to be similar rather than different. Ismail Kinay and Tuncay Ardic (2017), professors among the faculty of education at Dicle University in Turkey, conveyed their concern by stating the following: " Standard tests encourage students to become superficial thinkers unintentionally, by ignoring qualities that they cannot accurately assess" (p. 2). Among the idea of becoming " superficial thinkers," children are not able to learn how to critically think about subjects; once they are finished with learning the subject and then taking the test,

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they no longer remember the information. Due to all these underlying factors, it's logical to wonder whether or not standardized tests truly are a great idea.

### Teachers Frustrations Regarding Standardized Tests

Additionally, not only are students forced to be similar, limiting their ability to be creative, but teachers are often forced into that same mindset as well because they are required to teach to the tests. “[Chicago Public Schools] teachers have reported being forced into teaching their student’s testing strategies, at the expense of teaching content and processes to enable students to meet standards” (Chicago Teachers Union, 2016, para. 12). In accordance with teachers having to comply with a set group of standards they have to teach, they are subsequently punished if their students don’t consistently perform to the level that they should. However, in reality, a student may not meet these standards due to a plethora of other factors outside a teacher’s control that contribute to low scores on tests such as living in poverty, children not having enough to eat each night, or neglectful parents. These factors have a greater influence on how a child will perform on high-stakes tests, and because many low-income students do not perform well, standardized tests only contribute to the achievement gap that these tests claimed to be working to fix: “ Corporate reformers use the academic achievement gap to justify increasing the frequency and consequences of high-stakes testing” rather than “ addressing the root causes of how such gaps arise and persist in society” (Chicago Teachers Union, 2016, para. 7). What it boils down to is that teachers are being forced into a corner rather than being able to improvise and teach students what they believe to be

important as well, and they are often unable to address the underlying problems of each student, causing further difficulties down the road of achievement.

The problems already mentioned regarding teacher's negative attitudes towards standardized tests have just barely scratched the surface.

Professors Kinay and Ardic, previously mentioned, did a study on teachers in Turkey so they could gain a better understanding of how many teachers really felt about these required nationwide tests. Upon conducting their research, they found some variability on how teachers felt based on gender and the subject they taught, but the overlying theme these professors discovered is that teachers are at a moderate level of agreement. They aren't fully against standardized tests, but they also aren't entirely for them either. While they recognized that standardized tests have slight benefits, these teachers still found many faults in the system. Many believed they were a waste of time which can be echoed by another group of teachers who expressed the following: " One study found that teachers lose between 60 to 110 hours of instructional time in a year because of testing and the institutional tasks that surround it" (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014, p. 1). Not only are they a waste of time, but they take up entirely too much time, often leaving minimal opportunity for other subjects and activities, thus narrowing the curriculum. Another complaint found in Kinay and Ardic's study includes the following: These tests don't point schools in the right direction of trying to improve achievement. In fact, many teachers believe that their personal tests do better in terms of effectively evaluating their students: standardized tests tend to cast negative shadows on

curriculum, they often label students which can be seen from the achievement gap debate mentioned earlier, and greater stress and pressure results from having to participate in these tests. Teachers also expressed that it reduces their job satisfaction and lessens student-teacher motivation in learning (2017, p. 4-5). While some may have an indifferent attitude towards these tests, many others still indicate that standardized tests are a detriment to schools and affect students and teachers more than they are worth.

### The Effects of Standardized Tests on Students

Upon studying the effects these required tests have on teachers, it is also important to study the effects they personally have on students. Laura Lee Kearns, associated with St. Francis Xavier University, discusses a series of interviews done with students who failed a high stake standardized English literacy test in Canada that is required to pass in order to graduate high school (they do receive a second chance to take it but must enroll in a literacy course if they fail the test again). Many expressed shock upon finding out that they failed, and others found it “degrading knowing that I didn’t pass” (2011, p. 8). This led many to doubt their ability to be successful in school even though they were performing adequately in their English classes. The fact that they failed this test caused some to doubt and then gain a different, negative perspective of themselves. Another teen boldly argued that these tests are a bad idea because her high school teachers did an excellent job of helping/motivating her, and of pushing her to be her best, but the people that created these tests didn’t know anything about these students: “[T]hose who are marking it, they are not going to know who this

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person is...They don't know their wishes, and hopes and dreams" (p. 9). The creators of these tests have no idea of the progress students have made throughout the course of the year, but their teachers do, so why is it fair to put such a high demand on this kind of test when personal teachers have a better understanding of the student and what they are capable of? Because of this, many questioned how helpful this test truly was for their learning and looked at it as something to "get over" so they could then move on to graduate (p. 7-10). From the data uncovered, one can see how detrimental these kinds of tests may have on someone's mental and emotional well-being. All too often, standardized test creators and educators don't allow the students to have a say in the matter. They aren't able to understand the toll it takes on some of them, and until that is fully realized, these tests will most likely never be able to meet the needs of the students they are intended to help.

Many problems students face regarding these tests were just discussed, but one more important factor to take into consideration is how these tests affect the minority groups of each state and country. The National Council of Teachers of English (2014) touched on this subject when they suggested in their policy recommendations that "the standardized tests being used [should be] valid and reliable for the populations of students being tested" and that "extra time, dictation, and translators for English language learners" need to be implemented in order to give these students the best chance of succeeding (p. 3). Complaints have been expressed that standardized tests do a major disservice to groups such as English language learners (ELLs) because they are at a disadvantage when they take these

tests due to their language. One of the issues that came about from the study mentioned in the previous paragraph is that some students believe they failed the test because English wasn't their first language. This led to them being labeled as a group of "marginalized" and "illiterate" students (Kearns, 2011, p. 14). The definition of a standardized test, talked about in the first paragraph, emphasized that these tests are graded in the same consistent/standard manner. However, ELLs taking these tests are unfairly held to the same English-speaking standards as their peers who have spoken English their whole life, even though they may not be very fluent in the language, thus hurting their scores. When people come from certain backgrounds, they tend to feel unwelcome in the educational system, and standardized tests only make it worse. Kearns (2011) continued to say the following: "In working towards the 'well-being of learners,' Sayed and Soudien (2003) have urged us to notice that equitable education is not simply a matter of treating everyone the same in order to achieve a fair result" (p. 14). What Kearns is suggesting is that we are all different. We all come from different racial and cultural backgrounds, and because of that, the gap only continues to widen for those who these tests aren't appropriately geared towards. Due to all these challenges, it can be difficult to know how to compensate for these differences in cultures and populations, but there are a few people who have posed logical suggestions, and they should be seriously taken into account.

### Alternatives to Standardized Tests

Standardized tests should not be considered the only valid form of assessment among students in school. Teachers have shown time and time

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again the value of varied forms of assessment that more accurately tests a student's knowledge and also make it more enjoyable for the kids in the process. In the article, "Creative Alternatives to Standardized Test Taking," American University gave well-founded insights into possible replacements for standardized tests in the future. One idea they proposed is that schools use game-based assessments: "Games can measure things like creativity, persistence and collaboration that couldn't otherwise be tested by traditional multiple-choice exams" (School of Education). Furthermore, they express that by participating in these games, the students don't have to stop their learning to take a test. A benefit for teachers comes the opportunity to witness a student's learning process because they aren't just looking at a final grade. Another valid form of evaluation is portfolio-based assessments. Two examples include growth and evaluation portfolios. Growth portfolios allow students to creatively show the improvements they have made over time, and they enable the graders to better identify each student's strengths and weaknesses through all the work they have produced in their class. The point of an evaluation portfolio is for students to be able to show the processes of all their completed work and to convey their achievement on the required curricular goals. One of the biggest advantages to these portfolios is that students are able to pick their best work and then discuss everything they have accomplished with their teachers (School of Education). The point of these different assessments is that they take out all the pressure from high-stakes tests, and they allow students to show what they are truly capable without being confined into one type of test with only one correct answer.

While the creative alternatives to standardized tests are an intriguing idea, one teacher was observed incorporating inquiry-based instruction into his lessons. One of the major complaints of teachers across the globe is that standardized tests inhibit creativity and narrow the curriculum in a classroom. Christopher Longo (2010), teacher at Bethel Middle School and doctorate student at Western Connecticut State University, argued that by increasing inquiry in classes, students were still able to experience creativity, discovery, and curiosity: “ Inquiry-based learning defines the teacher’s role as helping students through the process of discovering knowledge for themselves and not providing the knowledge for them, thereby promoting creativity” (p. 2). Longo believes that a teacher can still prepare their students for standardized tests without “ spoon-feeding” them the information required in the curriculum through “ combin[ing] both content and process skills” (p. 3). One can incorporate an engaging, experimental, and hands-on environment, aided by personal inquiry, while continuing to teach what the state requires. This way involves student-led instructional lessons which is what it should often be. As mentioned in a previous paragraph, there isn’t enough thought given to what the students want or to how they feel, but by implementing these suggested principles, students are able to become greater thinkers by driving their own learning. While it is essential that the teacher is there for support and to ensure that all requirements are being met, it is still possible to make school exciting again.

#### Counter Argument: Positives to Standardized Tests

Amidst all the controversy of standardized tests, there are those who believe there are positive and helpful aspects to them. Joshua Starr, chief executive <https://assignbuster.com/standardized-tests-the-epidemic-across-the-world/>

officer of Phi Delta Kappan International, understands the frustrations of these assessments because as an educator, he expressed dissatisfaction for them as well. However, over time he has been able to recognize a few positive facets among the growing annoyance of teachers and students alike. Starr (2017) declared the following: “ First, test-based accountability forced schools and districts to learn how to use data in new and powerful ways” (p. 1). In other words, they do allow schools, to a certain extent, to use the data they found from the tests to measure where all schools stand on specific subjects. Another argument Starr makes regarding these tests is that they are able to bring to light the idea that these assessments sorely underserve minority groups (p. 1). By realizing this, the creators of these tests know that something needs to change; however, this all depends on if they are actually willing to make that change. Essentially, while that statement from Starr may seem negative, he makes a valid, positive point that tests make the educators a bit more aware of the diversity of their students and how their needs aren't always being met. Further aspects mentioned by Starr discuss the fact that standardized tests can be used as a way to design improvements in teaching, and that by “ treat[ing] the results as a starting point for further assessment, they can help steer us in the right direction” (p. 1-2).

### Refutation of Starr's Arguments

Starr composed interesting viewpoints on standardized tests that do have some validity to them; however, flaws may be found in some of them as well. Regarding his point that these tests allow schools to use data in a new and powerful way, a lot of the controversy circling standardized tests is that the <https://assignbuster.com/standardized-tests-the-epidemic-across-the-world/>

data found does not always accurately portray students' knowledge. The second statement made by Starr, emphasizing these tests ability to point out diversity flaws, is a bit contradicting and disappointing. They may point out these flaws, but the creators of these tests usually do nothing to fix it. Consequently, it continues to be a reoccurring problem. The last statement mentioned is that standardized tests may be used as a starting point to help lead schools in the right direction. However, history has proven that once data is collected, the same kinds of tests continue to be administered as an answer to the data found so more information can be gathered, thus creating a vicious cycle. By doing this, the curriculum is still being narrowed, thus often prohibiting teachers from doing things such as " helping students develop the noncognitive abilities that support better life outcomes" (National Council of Teachers of English, 2014, p. 2). The teacher's authority and autonomy are being reduced, and the students aren't being challenged or enjoying the opportunity to be creative. If tests were appropriately used in the way that Starr suggests, then they may hold greater merit in schools, but until that happens, those limitations will always be there.

#### Conclusion: Re-emphasizing Problems and Changes That Need to Be Made

Standardized testing is a touchy subject for many as there are frequent discussions about how beneficial they really are. The most prevalent arguments are that they limit student's learning, thus reducing curiosity and creativity, that they waste too much time on preparing students for them, that they tend to contribute to the achievement gap rather than help it, that they cause students to feel overly stressed and degraded if they don't do well enough, and that they narrow the curriculum, thus decreasing a

teacher's authority and ability to teach subjects they deem important as well. While standardized tests don't completely control every single second of every school day, they create enough of a hindrance that the problems and disadvantages should not be overlooked. Completely changing the policy for these required assessments is much easier said than done, but something can be done about what strategies they focus on when deciding what to assess and how they choose to assess it. Students deserve the opportunity to not only thrive in school but to also enjoy their time doing so; if standardized tests continue at the rate they are progressing towards, they will only make matters worse and create an environment that students and teachers don't want to participate in.

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