

CHAPTER ONE

Standardized Testing

She paces the classroom during the test, not daring to sit or to carry a pen or pencil to work on some grading. Her feet ache, and she has countless things to do. Lisa thought that during the test she'd be able to catch up on her grading, to finally write back to her students in their personal journals, and plan for the next units of study in her classes. A few teachers in her school didn't follow strict test-proctoring strategies (which invalidated test scores for an entire grade), and since then, teachers have been doubted and watched closely. So she attempts to casually circulate, as her principal told her to. For two hours. She was warned to never stand still, and in no circumstance was she to speak or make a hand gesture to her students. Lisa never thought she would find herself in this situation, a creative teacher whose graduate school program focused on critical thinking and problem solving, not bubble sheets and test proctoring. She thinks about her career choice over and over, as she also wishes she had worn different shoes.

Mention No Child Left Behind, or state-mandated standardized tests, and teachers will tell you how they feel. Formal and highly structured standardized testing takes place in every public school in our nation in Grades 3 through 12. Every teacher has a reaction to this, and none are immune to the effects of standardized tests on their teaching, the climate of their schools, and the students.

EFFECTS ON SCHOOL CLIMATE

In the example above, the stressful testing scenario had a negative effect on the climate of the school. Lisa described distrust from her principal and a climate of tension and stress that permeated the whole building.

Many times, teachers are the “administrators” of these high-stakes standardized tests, usually without training or any time to review the materials and responsibilities. In addition to the regular teaching responsibilities, teachers must read and understand a 100-page booklet about the test, its administration and procedures. In many cases, they’ve picked up the booklet five minutes before the test, after they’ve sharpened 50 pencils, set up the room, put the “do not disturb” sign on the door, and turned the phone ringer off. That was after arranging for Joey to take the test in a separate space and finding breakfast for Sam, an adult to scribe for Carrie, and staff to read the questions to Steve. And now the teacher is panicked, fervently scanning the booklet for the key information. When the state monitors come to visit, those folks who know the procedures inside and out because it is their primary responsibility, they will undoubtedly find problems.

This climate of tension and stress permeates the school, not just among teachers but also among students, who were already worried about the test and now see their teacher scurrying around the room with a pinched expression.

EFFECTS ON CURRICULUM

After the test results come in, the effects on the school can be wide reaching. In one interviewee’s school, their testing results came back low in writing. But it was not as cut and dried as one would think. The school was full of talented and well-taught writers. As required by the state, and indicated in best-practices techniques for teaching, the students were taught to use the writing process: Students wrote rough drafts, garnered feedback from peers and the teacher, then revised and edited, ultimately producing a piece they were very proud of (and that met state standards). Students also wrote about their reading in class journals, with a rubric to

guide them and no space limit. On their state's standardized test, the students were given a genre of writing with which they were well acquainted: procedures. They had received direct instruction in procedure writing, and used the writing process, state rubrics, and student examples to develop standard-meeting procedure pieces. The only problem was the test provided just a small rectangle to write in. The students could not go outside this defined rectangle and had never experienced anything like this in their young writing lives.

The students clammed up; they didn't know what to do. The six-year veteran teacher I interviewed described seeing students physically tense up, their eyes wide as they tried to understand the format. They panicked. Some made a list of materials, as they'd been taught, and used up half of the space. Then, they only had room for one or two steps. The rectangle was full; the procedure was incomplete. Others wrote complete procedure pieces that were painstakingly small, barely legible. Others gave up and left the essay blank.

So the scores were low.

An article in the local newspaper reported that the students in this particular school scored low on writing. The principal was upset, and probably embarrassed, but any teacher in the school could have told you what happened. The test measured a certain type of writing, and a certain length, that was not taught or expected in school.

So, of course, this had to change. The school promptly began meeting, discussing, and engaging in professional development about writing. Everyone felt the pressure of "failing" in this space-limited kind of writing, which had not been valued, encouraged, or even talked about before this test.

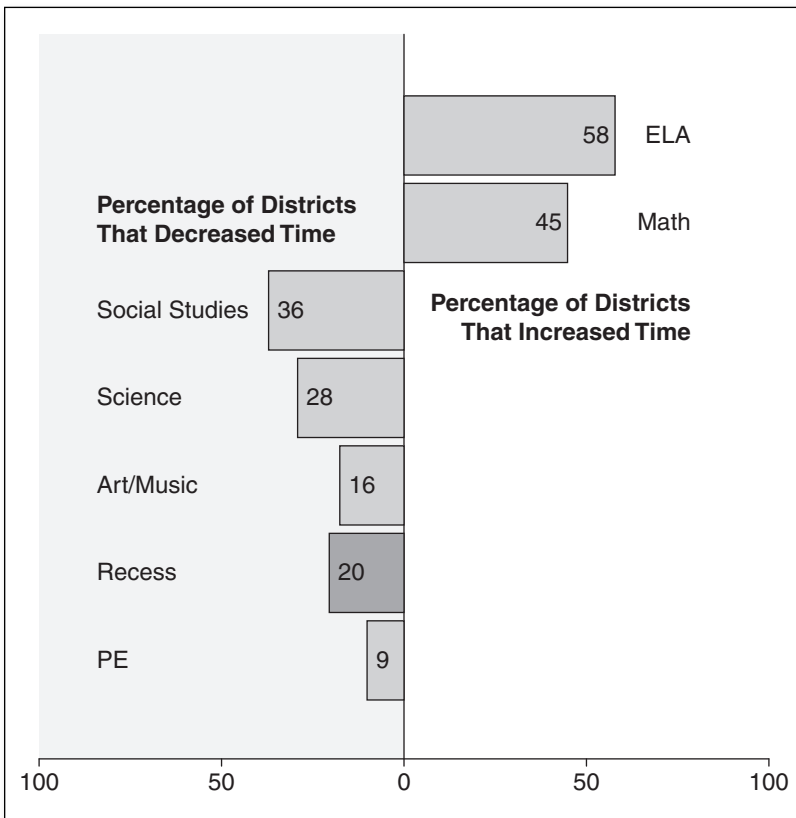
The next year, the students took several practice tests and were ready for this kind of abbreviated writing. And indeed, the scores did improve. But what was lost? Are the students better off for learning it? They might or might not be, but these larger curricular questions can be lost in a high-stakes testing environment.

In some school districts, educational programs and institutions are on the chopping block if they don't lead to improved test scores. Recess, class meetings, and even whole subjects such as music, art, science, and history are being cut back or eliminated to focus on the only areas that are tested yearly: math and reading

(see Figure 1.1). The *New York Times* (Dillon, 2006) reported on a survey by the Center for Educational Policy:

Seventy-one percent of the nation’s 15,000 school districts had reduced the hours of instructional time spent on history, music and other subjects to open up more time for reading and math. The center is an independent group that has made a thorough study of the new act and has published a detailed yearly report on the implementation of the law in dozens of districts. (para. 5)

Figure 1.1 Many school districts reported increasing time for ELA and math and decreasing time in other subjects since 2001. Social studies and science were more likely to lose minutes than recess, PE, or art.



Source: Barth (2008).

For the teachers of these core subjects, they are losing their creativity and academic freedom in exchange for reading a scripted text. Elaine teaches kindergarten, and she thinks teachers need to be given more academic freedom to stay creative and engaged. About her teaching, she said, “My school uses direct instruction. Therefore, I read from a book. I act. I don’t teach. I rehearse a script over and over again. It’s sad.” The lack of varied subjects, and rich and diverse instructional methods for teaching children, is slowly draining the life and motivation out of teaching.

EFFECTS ON TEACHING SCHEDULES AND LEARNING OUTCOMES

The standardized tests required in Grades 3 through 12 are given at different times during the school year, depending on multiple factors. Some states take the test in the fall and others in the spring. This may seem like a small item, but a great deal is affected by the testing schedule.

For example, in some western states the tests are given in May. So in the early spring, teachers are rushing through the curriculum getting students ready for these high-stakes state tests. Sam, a fourth-grade teacher, shares his perspective:

This panic causes teachers to throw quality teaching practices out the window, and suddenly schools become stressful test-prep boot camps where dump-truck loads of concepts are crammed, jammed, and force-fed into children’s minds at alarming speeds.

Struggling students who have been barely hanging on during the year may completely go under in these last few months. Many give up entirely, and this can affect their educational future for years to come.

The other disadvantage to testing in May is that the last few weeks of school (a good month or two in some schools) is considered a waste by many teachers and parents. After working so hard to get ready for the tests, many teachers cut back on expectations and teaching the curriculum, wasting valuable learning and instruction time. Without the tests to disrupt the

third trimester, April, May, and early June are often prime time for student learning:

Students are so adapted to the class that it becomes second nature; they literally soak up the knowledge and skills taught. (Teachers take it for granted, actually, how much their classes have matured and how comfortably quick the pace moves as compared to the first trimester.) It was so frustrating that other teachers (and parents, too) were sending out the message/vibe that it was “kick back” time once standardized testing had ended. The big tests have become the focus of our third trimester. Once the testing is over, it seems there is no reason to continue with the school year. It is a terrible waste of precious time that could be utilized to continue with rich and engaging lessons.

Many teachers commented on how standardized testing impacts their regular schedules and curriculum. They have been working for months to develop daily practices among their students, which benefit children academically and socially, and those are essentially thrown out for a few weeks. Losing these routines can set a class back in productivity for a great while. The testing preparation, the actual testing, and the recovery into a normal schedule can take a month or more in total. When you are only dealing with 9 or 10 months of school, this is a considerable block of time.

Consider the pressure for teachers to “finish” whatever math program they are using. Math programs are designed to take the whole year. Taking that month away increases the stress and the workload for the teacher. Quickening the pace of instruction impacts students’ mastery of skills. The result can be a rush-rush mentality that detracts from the ideal learning environment and lessens the ability of teachers to complete a course of instruction to prepare kids for the next grade level. According to authors of a recent study on the effects of standardized testing in Texas, the “birthplace” of the No Child Left Behind Act, this rush-rush mentality and focus on test preparation has caused a reduction in the quality and quantity of curriculum, increased instruction of lower level skills, and has increased the gap between the poorest and most privileged children (Meier, Kohn, Darling-Hammond, Sizer, & Wood, 2004).

One of the most troubling problems with giving standardized tests for two or three weeks was shared by a special educator from a rural school:

Most of the students I teach need intensive instruction daily to meet their IEP [Individualized Education Plan] goals, and to function well in school. During the days we are testing, all our staff is utilized by giving the tests with accommodations, so there is no time to do this crucial work with kids. They end up losing days of instruction and progress that we need to be making to help them progress. And these are the children who need structure, routine, and predictability. With days of repeated testing, all that goes out the window. With many kids, you have to start from scratch after testing. The damage is palpable, and it takes awhile for these students to get back into their instruction and routines.

This comment illustrates how testing can take up much more time than simply giving the test, especially for special education students. This teacher and others I interviewed are frustrated with how standardized testing disrupts classroom routines, curricular goals, and the progress of special education students.

EFFECTS ON STUDENTS

You may have heard about the sixth grader who was not allowed to leave his classroom during the standardized tests to use the bathroom. Then, in the classroom filled with his peers, the 12-year-old boy had an accident. Imagine the humiliation and the damage done to this boy's self image in the sixth grade, when students are in preadolescence and are very insecure. This incident, written about by Dan Brown (2007) in the *Huffington Post*, illustrates the troubling high-stakes climate in which children are facing these tests.

Many teachers I interviewed talked about the stress the daily hours of testing places on their students.

One nine-year veteran teacher talked about how developmentally inappropriate it was to ask third- and fourth-grade students to sit still and be quiet (and to masterfully take a test) for several

days in a row, for two hours a day. The educator watched them read a passage again and again, trying to find the right answer, squirming, stewing, visibly quaking with energy, effort, and frustration. Their third-grade bodies just couldn't handle this type of testing, and the teacher wondered how exactly this could measure their ability, if they are not developmentally ready to show what they know on the test.

Teachers have told me of students vomiting or feeling nauseated before, during, and after the test. Others have seen repeated headaches develop in their most bright and astute students.

Many teachers discussed the troubling departure from a more rich and diverse instructional program to basic test-prep work. Students who might exceed the standard and need more in-depth learning may not get it during this time. And students who are seriously struggling might be left behind in all the flurry of test preparation.

This effect is especially pernicious for students at low-performing schools, most of them from poor urban families, who are being subjected to lower-level drill for skill-type teaching, day in and day out. These children may indeed learn how to improve their test scores, by memorizing a discreet set of facts or ideas, and not understand or comprehend them for long-term retention and the development of critical-thinking skills. Alfie Kohn (2000) writes in *Education Week*:

Again, there's no denying that many schools serving low-income children of color were second-rate to begin with. Now, however, some of these schools, in Chicago, Houston, Baltimore, and elsewhere, are arguably becoming third-rate as testing pressures lead to a more systematic use of low-level, drill-and-skill teaching, often in the context of packaged programs purchased by school districts. Thus, when someone emphasizes the importance of "higher expectations" for minority children, we might reply, "Higher expectations to do what? Bubble-in more ovals correctly on a bad test—or pursue engaging projects that promote sophisticated thinking?" The movement driven by "tougher standards," "accountability," and similar slogans arguably lowers meaningful expectations insofar as it relies on standardized testing as the primary measure of achievement. The more that poor children fill in

worksheets on command (in an effort to raise their test scores), the further they fall behind affluent kids who are more likely to get lessons that help them understand ideas. If the drilling does result in higher scores, the proper response is not celebration, but outrage: The test results may well have improved at the expense of real learning. (pp. 60, 46–47)

In some cases, when it looks as though test scores are going up, one must read the back story to understand whether all students were assessed, how the dropout rate plays into it, and how much quality teaching is happening. Houston, Texas, was touted nationally as a success story for raising the test scores of all of its students. The district claimed a low 1.5 percent dropout rate, but at Sharpston High School, 463 of 1,700 students left during the school year; none were reported as dropping out. Instead, they were assigned a code that meant they had changed schools, gone back to a native country, or gone for their GED, when many of them never reported these reasons to the school (Meier et al., 2004). The real story is that a new correlation has arisen from frequent standardized testing: falling graduation rates as standardized testing increases (Meier et al., 2004).

Jonathan Kozol (2007b) also decries the effects of standardized testing on teachers and on the education that African American children in large measure are receiving. He said in the *Huffington Post* article about his hunger strike against No Child Left Behind:

When I ask them why they've grown demoralized, they routinely tell me it's the feeling of continual anxiety, the sense of being in a kind of "state of siege," as well as the pressure to conform to teaching methods that drain every bit of joy out of the hours that their children spend with them in school.

"I didn't study all these years," a highly principled and effective first-grade teacher told me—she had studied literature and anthropology in college while also having been immersed in education courses—"in order to turn black babies into mindless little robots, denied the normal breadth of learning, all the arts and sciences, all the joy in reading literary classics, all the spontaneity and power to ask interesting questions that kids are getting in the middle-class white systems." (para. 5–6)

Every year, high-stakes standardized testing wreaks havoc on student learning, school climate, and teaching in myriad ways, and the cumulative effects on schools, students, and teachers cannot be understated.



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS AND TEACHER LEADERS

- During an inservice at the beginning of the year, discuss with staff the testing practices, schedule, and policies of the school. Providing this framework allows teachers to look at their curricular plans and maps to see how testing will fit in. Then teachers can plan around this timetable and anticipate the impact to their curriculum. While these ideas are best practice, and written into legislation in some states, it is doubtful that they happen regularly in all schools.
- Provide training for teachers and school staff on test administration. Staff meetings are a great time for this, so teachers do not have to use their planning or personal time to prepare for the test. This could be as simple as providing time for teacher teams to read and review the testing protocols for each grade level. It is helpful if this is done a few weeks in advance of the test, so teachers and school staff have some time to address any gaps or problems in the procedural expectations for the exam. That way, administrators know their staff has been prepared for the testing, and can have trust and faith in their ability to proctor it.
- Provide time and opportunity for teachers and special educators to meet and review the testing needs for various students. This can eliminate hurried hallway consultations about where a child who needs a separate testing environment will work.
- Develop strategies with the guidance counselor for how to prepare students for the testing environment, especially for elementary students. Guidance counselors can team with teachers to help prepare students for this testing, or the guidance counselor can teach a few classes about handling test anxiety.
- Team up to send information home about how parents can support their child during the test-taking period. There is lots of

good information about this available, and it can make all the difference for students. See the additional resources section on page 17.

- Communicate the value of student's education beyond the test scores to teachers and staff. This will help teachers see that administrators don't view tests as the end-all-be-all of education and that they care about the whole child as well, not just the snapshot the test provides.
- Collaborate with states to determine the testing window. It would be beneficial for states, administrators, teachers, and educational leaders to agree on a schedule that will have the least negative impact on students and quality teaching. This decision should not be based on how much it will cost (as it is in some states) but on the best time for teachers and students.
- Encourage teachers to prepare students for the format of the tests. By looking at the actual format in a practice test, students are much more at ease when the actual tests come around, as are teachers. And more of what they know will be shared in the test. This doesn't mean teaching to the test, or doing weeks of test preparation, but allowing students to become familiar with the format so they aren't overwhelmed in the moment.



WORDS OF WISDOM FROM VETERAN TEACHERS

When asked how to cope with the pressures of standardized testing, veteran teachers try to put it in perspective. They know that these scores do not reflect everything they do with their students, and it never could. Many teachers advocate for more classroom-based measures of success.

Veteran teachers also do not seem to throw out the regular curriculum for test preparation. They integrate it into their teaching throughout the year or do only a few sessions to prepare their kids for the strategies and format of the test. They believe in their teaching and their students enough to avoid getting swept up in the drama of standardized testing.

Teachers also have been rallying and organizing around this issue. They have made recommendations for how to change the

No Child Left Behind Act to include a greater focus on classroom-based assessments. They will undoubtedly be influencing future legislation in the current administration. Veteran teachers advocate, write, and speak up on these issues and encourage others to do so, too. As Kozol (2007a, p. 207–208) in *Letters to a Young Teacher* puts it, teachers need to “see themselves not just as skilled practitioners but also as warriors for justice. If they won’t speak out for their kids, who will?”



THE SILVER LINING: PERSONALLY FULFILLING

Sophie is finishing the dishes. It’s after 8 p.m., and she’s tired; she’s been on her feet teaching all day, then chasing around her young children after school. Her mind wanders to her former student, Liz, who is about to go in for knee surgery. She picks up the phone and calls her.

They talk, really talk, about knees, recovery, books, and school. Having an adult to talk to—who is not one of your parents—is a big deal, and the tension in Liz’s voice eases a bit through the conversation. Liz thanks Sophie, and they hang up.

This is why Sophie teaches. It’s the meaningful interactions between herself and her students, sometimes years after having taught them, that keep her going.

Sophie is like so many teachers I have spoken with. She started teaching because she loved being with children and wanted to make a difference in their lives. Now, when faced with standardized tests, endless standards, and increasing paperwork, she remembers these relationships. They are what matters most.

Sophie’s feelings were echoed by many teachers. A teacher from an urban high school said, “I just can’t seem to find anything else that is as satisfying and fulfilling as teaching. There is *no* other job that lets you make such a huge difference in so many people’s lives.”

She is reflecting not on the limited tangible rewards, of course, but on the personal connections a teacher can make with students. This might never be spoken. That feeling of fulfillment might come from only a nod, a smile, or knowing that a child is safe, has learned something, or developed confidence because of you. These are not measured by tests, but their impact can be monumental.



HOPE ON THE HORIZON: REEVALUATING OUR STANDARDIZED-TESTING CULTURE

Thankfully, many teachers, educational writers, professors, principals, and administrators are sounding the alarm about the damage that high-stakes testing is having on our nation's children, our teachers, and our schools. Principal George Wood encourages those involved with education:

Educators, parents, and students need to come together to challenge what is happening to the daily quality of school life for our children as a result of the pressure on testing. We seem to have accepted these tests as a fact of life when in fact they are only a recent development with no proven history. And now we have for the first time a federal law that mandates this unproven measure of our schools as the arbiter of what counts as a quality education. (Meier et al., 2004, p. 48)

He and the other authors of *Many Children Left Behind* offer real, meaningful, and doable suggestions for how to modify our national education strategy and plan. These ideas include more flexibility with how to assess students at different developmental levels, using multiple measures for assessment, looking at the overall progress of a student versus a snapshot that testing provides, among other suggestions.

We are coming through a time period with singular and heavy focus on regular standardized testing. We've seen the results. Now it is time for a more moderate, thoughtful, and measured approach that values the opinions of teachers, parents, administrators, and students as much as politicians and educational experts.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Print Resources

- Flippo, R. (2008). *Preparing students for testing and doing better in school*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Kohn, A. (2000). *The case against standardized testing: Raising the scores, ruining the schools*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

- McNeil, L. (2007). *Contradictions of school reform: Educational costs of standardized testing*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Myers, E. (2009). *The power of teacher networks*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.
- Sack, P. (2001). *Standardized minds: The high price of America's testing culture and what we can do to change it*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.

Internet Resources

General Test Tips for Helping Your Child During This Stressful Time

Family Education. (n.d.). *Standardized tests: Preparation and advice*. Available from <http://school.familyeducation.com/educational-testing/study-skills/34555.html>

Links to Articles and Books Recommended by PBS About Helping Your Child With Standardized Testing

PBS Parents. (n.d.). *It's my life: Test stress*. Available from <http://pbskids.org/itsmylife/parents/resources/teststress.html>

Tips for Parents to Help Children With Differing Learning Styles

Molland, J. (n.d.). *How to help all kids succeed on standardized tests*. Available from www.parenthood.com/article-topics/how_to_help_all_kids_succeed_on_standardized_tests.html

Steps for Teachers, Parents, Administrators, School Board Members, and Superintendents to Fight the Overuse of Standardized Testing in Schools

Kohn, A. (2001, January). Fighting the tests: A practical guide to rescuing our schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*. Available from www.alfiekohn.org/teaching/ftt.htm