

Effects of State Testing

The increase in large-scale standardized testing in our nation's schools is one major result of demands for accountability. Such testing also impacts many aspects of school and family life and culture. For some, certain unintended impacts may be like side effects of medicines that need to be tolerated; for others they raise larger questions about educational priorities.

Every year my children take nearly a week of state tests at their school. Why so much testing?

Federal and state laws have substantially increased the number of tests students take each year. Federal law, for example, requires states to test students in reading and mathematics every year in grades 3-8. Some state laws require testing in nearly all grade levels and in most subjects.

Increased state testing stems from a desire to better monitor student and school progress, in addition to encouraging increased achievement. Among many purposes that tests are intended to serve are to:

- Reinforce high state standards and high expectations for students and schools. In recent years, states have intensified efforts to develop and refine standards in main subject areas.
- Measure how well students are reaching those standards. Based on federal requirements, all states are seeking to more fully and effectively align state tests with their state standards. Progress in this alignment varies from state to state.
- Focus curriculum and instruction on the standards. If the main statewide student assessment is a standards-based test, then the instruction that students receive, based on the curricula and instructional materials used in the classroom, also need to be standards-based.
- Compare different schools and districts and provide that information to parents, educators, policymakers, and the public as they consider school quality and needs.
- Improve educational programs at individual, classroom, school, district, and state levels.
- Monitor individual student progress and help diagnose individual strengths and weaknesses.

Resources

Helpful Web Sites

CAESL

<http://www.caesl.org/>

CRESST

<http://www.cse.ucla.edu/>

WestEd

<http://www.wested.org/>

Parent Portal at LHS

<http://lhsparent.org>

Greatschools.net

<http://www.greatschools.net/>

National PTA

<http://www.pta.org/>

National Parent Information Network

<http://www.NPIN.org/>

Family Education Network

<http://www.familyeducation.com>



All of these intended purposes driving the use of state tests have led to expanded testing in schools. In the current climate of increased demand for accountability in education and concern about student achievement, teacher performance, and school quality, such tests have taken on greater significance.

I've heard some parents express concerns. Are there drawbacks to state tests?

State tests provide useful and needed information, and—for the foreseeable future—they are here to stay. However, research has indicated some grounds for caution, especially when test scores are exclusively relied upon to make important decisions about students or schools. Some critics of increased testing question the amount of time devoted to both test preparation and the testing itself. Many other concerns have been raised, including the following:

- Such testing may **narrow the topics** taught in school to only what is tested by the state; frequently just math and reading; sometimes social studies and science. Topics such as art, music, vocational skills, and physical education may receive much less emphasis.
- State testing can also **narrow the range of each subject** taught. For example, if a science test is to cover the Moon but not the entire solar system, then the solar system may receive less emphasis or not be taught. Teachers may “teach to the test” rather than presenting a subject more completely, in greater depth, or in a meaningful context for students.
- There may be a tendency **to emphasize facts and basic skills** with less emphasis on problem-solving and other complex thinking capabilities, applied knowledge, or depth of understanding. Multiple-choice questions typically make up the majority of state tests. They are efficient and inexpensive to score, but may not measure higher-level thinking, such as designing and conducting a science experiment.
- Some research suggests that tests may be less precise than often assumed, and could misclassify students or schools. For example, research indicates that the range of scores from the same person taking the test *at different times* can vary widely. In a few well-publicized but rare cases, major testing companies have made scoring errors that adversely affected significant numbers of students because—in those cases—a **single test** was used to make important decisions.
- While useful, the widespread availability of state test scores in newspapers and on the Internet may—when presented in isolation—contribute to test scores being seen as the only measure of school quality. This can lead to incorrect or incomplete beliefs about a school. Researchers have long recommended that **multiple** indicators of school quality be used at more than one point in time—including such factors as percentages of students passing advanced placement classes, attendance, and teacher expertise—as well as state and district test results.

Opportunity to Learn

One other extremely important issue related to the effects of statewide testing has to do with whether or not schools provide children with adequate opportunities to learn the material needed to do well on state tests. Many less economically advantaged schools, for example, may have a higher percentage of new teachers or relatively inexperienced teachers than schools with greater resources. Schools in less advantaged communities may not be able to offer classes in certain subjects or more advanced classes whose content may be necessary for high achievement on the state test. Numerous issues relating to “the achievement gap” (see CAESL Assessment Brief #8) need to be considered. Again, tying high consequences (such as retention or non-graduation) to a single test is particularly troublesome if the school failed to provide a child with the necessary knowledge and skills to take the test in the first place.

What You Can Do

- Encourage the use of more than state test scores to measure student learning and school quality. During parent and teacher conferences, ask for multiple indicators of how your child is doing in school.
- Work through your school site council, PTA, and/or other community forums to increase the understanding and appropriate use of testing and test scores.
- Closely study your district scores for evidence of improvement over time, not just comparisons to other schools in a single year.
- Learn much more about testing and its effects by reading the recommended articles below.

Useful Resources

Standards for Educational and Psychological Testing. 1999, Washington DC. American Educational Research Association (AERA), American Psychological Association, National Council on Measurement in Education.

AERA Position Statement Concerning High-Stakes Testing in PreK-12 Education.

<http://www.aera.net/about/policy/stakes.htm>

The Uses and Misuses of Tests. 1984, Charles W. Daves, Editor. Jossey-Bass Publishers.

On Standardized Testing. 1991, Vito Perrone. <http://npin.org/library/pre1998/n00388/n00388.html>

Wondering What to Think About All These Tests? Greatschools.net.

<http://greatschools.net/cgi-bin/showarticle/CA/160/improve>



Standardized Testing in Schools. 2000, Peggy Patten.

<http://npin.org/pnews/2000/pnew100/feat100.html>

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Note: This article was developed by the Public Understanding strand of CAESL to summarize basic information for parents and the general public. It is not a CAESL position statement nor does it necessarily represent the precise views of diverse reviewers. We welcome comments!

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