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Standardized Testing: Help or Harm?

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Standardized Testing: Help or Harm?

Abstract

"Outside of the halls of education, we have many real-world ways to test knowledge and skills. If we want to teach someone to bake a cake or do a J-stroke in a canoe, we don't give a paper and pencil test – we look for successful demonstrations of the skills. Even where we need a paper test for some head knowledge stuff, like when we get a driver's license, the road test is the real proof of the pudding. In school settings, then, what we really need are valid measures of what students know and can do. A well-rounded toolbox of authentic measures of student learning can help us maintain truth in our statistics, excellence in performance, and individuality and freedom in our focus as students discover God's gifts and talents in their lives."

Posting about standardized testing and the concept of calling in educational settings from *In All Things* - an online hub committed to the claim that the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ has implications for the entire world.

<http://inallthings.org/standardized-testing-help-or-harm/>

Keywords

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Disciplines

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Comments

In All Things is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service at Dordt College](#).

Standardized Testing: Help or Harm?

 [all in allthings.org/standardized-testing-help-or-harm/](https://allthings.org/standardized-testing-help-or-harm/)

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Outside of the halls of education, we have many real-world ways to test knowledge and skills. If we want to teach someone to bake a cake or do a J-stroke in a canoe, we don't give a paper and pencil test – we look for successful demonstrations of the skills. Even where we need a paper test for some head knowledge stuff, like when we get a driver's license, the road test is the real proof of the pudding.

In school settings, then, what we really need are valid measures of what students know and can do. A well-rounded toolbox of authentic measures of student learning can help us maintain truth in our statistics, excellence in performance, and individuality and freedom in our focus as students discover God's gifts and talents in their lives.

Truth: High stakes standardized tests aren't always measuring what we really need to know. For example, students in some countries are great memorizers and test takers but may struggle with applications of knowledge to the world outside of school. Standardized tests don't necessarily measure practical knowledge or guarantee how well a student can apply the assessed knowledge. As committed truth-tellers, Christians involved with education want to be sure the message of a test score correlates with the reality of a student's true knowledge and skills.

Excellence: One of the many concepts in Philippians 4:8 that pertain to education is the concept of excellence; we need to be sure our assessments of the learning process don't pull us away from the pursuit of excellence at the heart of a biblical philosophy of education. However, standardized testing creates a situation where we're not aiming for the best for each child. While the thin "tail" on the high end of the score distribution curve for most tests means a very few have mastered the material on the test, the overall effect is that we're setting the bar for passing lower and lower to avoid the pain and embarrassment of whole schools not making the cutoff. That's not excellence. That, according to many critics, ends up "dumbing down" the whole educational process.

Student and teacher freedom: Instead of fostering an exploration of the potential that God has created in each person, standardized testing can create a stultifying effect. As a result, the kids suffer. In many schools across America, students no longer get art, music, or PE – because these aren't on the tests. In some schools, this means the elimination of recess too. Instead of offering a holistic approach to knowledge exploration and identity formation, schooling can become a giant test-prep mechanism focused on math and reading skills as defined by the state tests. High scoring students aren't necessarily able to explore all the interesting facets of science, history, and the arts that their high scores seem to indicate they are capable of exploring. Schools, parents—and even students—can get caught up in looking only at the numbers, and not fully think about what the numbers do and don't mean. Poor test takers, for example, aren't necessarily the academic disappointments the tests would make them out to be. but after enough years of being labeled a certain way, children can start to lose their natural curiosity and get locked into focusing their educational efforts on passing this one kind of test.

Relying so much on standardized tests also removes the ability of teachers and other local professionals to make more individualized (and usually more accurate) assessments. Instead of focusing on the judgments of qualified teachers sitting down one-on-one with students for some authentic demonstrations of students' areas of knowledge and types of skills, the state ends up putting a single test score on each child – which then also reflects on the teachers and on the school.

As the image of God, each child is endowed with talents, innate curiosity, and a desire for freedom of inquiry and creative expression, freedom to choose interests and areas to explore more fully. Teachers and schools that used to have schedules and curriculum materials designed to stimulate student interest and allow for delving more deeply into areas of interest have had to scale back. Standardized testing, by focusing on minimum competencies, takes everyone down to the same lowest expectations, often threatening the creative and critical thinking that the students should be doing. Instead of saying, let's see what you can do with this topic, standardized testing says, get the bare minimum memorized here so we can move on to the next bare minimum topic.

So, are there no positive benefits to standardized testing? Despite the myriad drawbacks listed above—and these are serious drawbacks—there are some very limited uses where standardized tests can provide truthful information, honor student individuality, and enhance a quest for excellence while respecting freedom in the educational process. Those uses would be quite infrequent and would involve carefully chosen tests and graciously prepared students. A standardized test can be useful under the above conditions to provide aggregate (not individual) performance data on a whole class or school for year to year comparisons or as one piece of an assessment of a whole school's success with state standards.

Secondly, although engaging in an educational activity just to provide practice for the next level of education is very suspect, the centrality of tests such as the ACT and SAT in the college admission process warrants the provision of a few occasions to practice test taking skills to reduce anxiety in these high stakes tests—since they are not likely to go away anytime soon. In these occasional uses of standardized tests, it is important to avoid over-relying on them or reading too much into the single score put on a student and the average score put on a whole class or school.

Standardized testing is one type of assessment, which can have some useful purposes at times. But the kind of emphasis we're currently experiencing on sorting and ranking kids across entire states and even across the country, according to standardized tests may be counter-productive, not just to our educational goals, but to how we were designed. As Christians, we need to reexamine the concept of calling in the educational setting. Students are called to certain responsibilities and teachers to others—both need to be free to exercise the responsibilities in their respective callings.