

**Excerpts from 2001**  
***Facing the Unhappy Day: Three Aspects of the High Stakes Testing Movement***  
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- High stakes testing is the practice of hinging a significant educational decision on the results of a single assessment tool.
- Indeed, the high stakes testing debate threatens to skew the public perception and political salience of education reform (n19). Much of the problem comes from common misperceptions that high stakes tests are the single best way to measure educational progress, reform curriculum, and motivate students.
- This is not a matter of policy, but of statistics: no single test, standing alone, can do what we ask of it. Even the SAT, which for over a half a century has been designed by some of the best minds in the testing field, does not predict first-year college grades as well as a student's high school GPA (n21).
- Tests, however, should be a means, not an end in and of themselves (n22).
- They also provide a tacit guarantee that more teaching hours will be spent on lower tracked students (n30).
- A rise in high stakes testing leads to a proportionate rise in the amount of classroom hours devoted to test preparation, often at the expense of other curricula (n33). Many have accused high stakes tests of placing a disproportionate emphasis on "lower order" thinking (n34), with no value given for such skills as the abilities to collaborate, ask for help, think creatively, or use initiative. They can have a stigmatizing affect on students and groups of students (n35). To a significant extent, high stakes tests also take away local control over school curricula, standards, and lesson plans (n36).
- High stakes tests will reflect the economic ability of students' families to provide private tutorials and preparation devices (n37).
- The overwhelming opinion in the testing community is that no single assessment device should be used as a sole criterion for making a high stakes decision about an individual student (n40). This is the conclusion not only of the two leading guidelines for responsible testing, but also of a non-partisan report commissioned by Congress to look at this issue. Evidence also suggests that some of the purposes for which high stakes tests are used, such as retaining students or placing students into low-track classes, have no justifiable educational benefit (n41).
- Additionally, the data resulting from the tests can be manipulated to present a false image of student improvement and belie the failure of reform efforts (n43). Indeed, there is every incentive for a school being rated on the test results to manipulate the data.
- The ones who bear the brunt of the punitive consequences of high stakes testing are the students (n53).
- The issue is not accountability, but who is held accountable for what, and how. There is a particular perversity in the fact that a single test result can completely derail a student's future but has slight, if any affect, on the administration or teachers.
- Indeed, it would be difficult to capture the depth and complexity of the classroom experience in a single assessment instrument (n56).
- There is a reason, after all, that a student's GPA is a better predictor than her score on the SAT.
- Accountability need not turn on high stakes.
- Similarly, the question is not one of lowered - or even varied - expectations for any population of students, but of the misuse of an invalid instrument to reinforce negative and false stereotypes (n57).
- Indeed, many advocates of high standards for all students are opponents of high stakes testing.
- To use a catchphrase, standards need not mean standardization.
- Despite America's love affair with the multiple choice test (n59), it tells us very little about the make and measure of a person, or about one's future potential. Even the SAT and the Law School Admission Test ("LSAT") can predict no more than approximately 17 percent of the variance in a student's first year grades in college and law school, respectively (n60). Where once standardized tests were seen as a gateway to opportunities, today they are being used as a gatekeeper.

- Standardized tests have become increasingly used as the sole criterion for making promotion decisions (n85).
- Peter Sacks, author of *Standardized Minds*, estimates that a student graduating high school in 2000 will have spent over 500 hours in his or her educational career, or eighty full school days, on testing (n86).
- We have become a society that places enormous trust in the overlap of tests, ability, and potential. Unfortunately, the statistics behind tests do not support this level of trust.
- Finally, the traditional "equal opportunity" rhetoric that works in the employment arena does not work as well in the education arena. Education is where students develop the skills to seize the opportunities presented to them.
- When we talk about a right to equality of opportunity rather than equality of outcomes, this understanding must be tempered in the education context by the reality that students have different needs and therefore require different inputs (n152). Schools have a duty not only to measure outputs but to provide inputs.
- A survey of the case law suggests that courts are more willing to protect employees than protect students in disparate impact cases; certainly no educational testing cases have reached the Supreme Court.
- High stakes tests lead to the phenomenon known as "teaching to the test," where teachers alter their lesson plans and course content to emphasize tested materials.
- As the state of Nebraska observed when ending its own testing program, you do not make the cow fatter by weighing it.
- Regardless of background or group membership, high stakes testing is simply bad practice.
- There is much both to recommend and criticize the implementation of standards-based education reform, but it should not rise or fall on the fate of the high stakes test. Rather, reformers, educators, politicians and parents should work together to form alternative accountability measures that insure an incentive to teach - and learn.
- In all of this, it is important to note that standards-based reform should only be the beginning, not the end, of educational reform.
- The purpose of education, however, has never been just rote learning. Standards-based education is, in some areas, a needed reform, but to allow schools to stop at the "three Rs" will do a great disservice to today's students (n413).
- Linking educational standards of increasing degrees of specificity to high stakes tests will not just severely limit students' classroom education but will sanction their freedom of independent thought.
- It is perhaps most appropriate, then, to end this article with a fundamental question that too few in this debate have addressed: why, exactly, are these tests so "high stakes?" The answer, sadly, is because we have created a one-track system to success. For the last several generations, the way to achieve the American dream has been through progressive levels of schooling. It has become such a norm that few, even in the midst of this debate, question it.
- "On the one hand, you have the Office for Civil Rights and various advocacy groups saying we may be overusing tests and they're having a disparate impact on minorities. On the other hand, this is an administration that's been pushing standards, and they spell standards T-E-S-T." Wildavsky.
- Even the company that brings you the SAT, the Educational Testing Service (ETS), recently came out with a policy document entitled against high stakes testing. See Paul E. Barton, *Too Much Testing of the Wrong Kind, Too Little of the Right Kind in K-12 Education* (1999), available at <http://www.ets.org/research/pic/testing/204928.pdf>.

\*The full text of 38,016 words available at

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