

Angela Engel of the Coalition for Better Education in Colorado wrote this excellent piece on High Stakes Testing.

Exposing the Myths of High Stakes Testing

Conversations in education have been dominated by the topic of test scores for the past two decades. Standardized tests are currently lauded as “the answer” to teacher accountability, higher student achievement, standards, and expectations. Claims of “objective measures,” and “scientific evaluations” promise to “fix” our schools and improve learning for children once and for all. Most realize the absurdity of this “guarantee” yet they are consoled by the claim ‘scientifically researched’ - however dubious. The standardized testing fib unquestioned and unchallenged imposes serious and lasting consequences for our schools and our children.

“The CSAP ensures accountability” -- The purpose of the CSAP is to measure a student’s *individual* performance on isolated discreet variables, yet Colorado is using it as an indicator of *entire schools’* performance. There is no test which measures the quality of a school. Standardized tests have become an educational security blanket. They falsely represent the product guarantee on our child’s learning. True accountability is realized from an informed and committed community. Through local control - the school board election process, school accountability teams, and parental involvement - parents and citizens can ensure that schools uphold the quality and values commonly desired. High stakes testing in fact reduces accountability in that it relies solely on test scores; imposing destructive consequences and ignoring all other factors that contribute to a successful school.

The crux of school reform lies more in internal empowerment and less in feigned accountability. The decision to empower either: A) those who are professionally trained in education, committed to real change, and invested in the welfare of our children, or B) those who are committed to winning campaigns and increasing profit margins, will likely determine the survival of public education and the future of this country.

“Testing raises expectations for student” -- CSAP and other high stakes tests represent a fraction of what students should be learning over the course of a school year. Many of the questions must be scored by the computer, reducing thinking to simple single solutions and the test must be generalized enough for thousands of students so that higher order thinking and critical reasoning are diminished. For instance, one session on a third grade reading test consists of 42 items; 34 represent multiple choice questions worth 34 points total, and 8 require short answer responses worth 18 points.^[i]

Tests don’t increase expectations; parents, teachers, and communities determine expectations for children and the quality of their learning. The pressure to “test well” negates the intrinsic value of learning and trivializes the entire educational process. We must expect a great deal more from our children than correct answers on a multiple choice test; we must provide a challenging and inclusive educational experience that engenders a sense of purpose and responsibility.

“Testing improves achievement” -- According to the promoters of high stakes testing, higher annual test scores are an indicator of “improved achievement.” In fact, annual increases in test scores are a more often the result of more time attention and resources being spent preparing for *that* test. If the focus were devoted to advancing teaching and learning, then it would be teaching and learning that is improved. “While students show consistent improvement on these state exams, the opposite is typically true of their performance on other, independent measures of academic achievement.”ⁱⁱ[\[ii\]](#)

Many argue that high stakes testing reduces the achievement gap and improves schools for poverty stricken children. CSAP scores are merely an indication of which schools serve the most disadvantaged - and conversely advantaged - populations. The scores are not prescriptive and the expense of the testing process diverts greatly needed resources away from real solutions such as smaller class sizes, teacher training, counseling and family services, curriculum resources, and after-school programs.

If there was real determination to improve learning conditions for poor and minority children, schools would be adequately funded. “Regardless of what anyone claims about student and school characteristics, *opportunity to learn* is the single most powerful predictor of student achievement.”ⁱⁱⁱ[\[iii\]](#) Testing diminishes real and meaningful achievement and it fails to honor and dignify the many successes and varied accomplishments of all children.

“Standardized tests are scientifically accurate” -- School critics and politicians often use the words ‘scientifically researched’ and ‘objective measure.’ The general population wrongly accepts that standardized testing is some empirical measure, and that tests constructed outside of the classroom far removed from the subjectivity of educational professionals will at last be able to accurately measure knowledge. We falsely imply that technology with its computer generated answer sheets and indiscriminate shaded bubbles possesses the critical absolutism needed to eradicate the inherent flaws of human judgment. There is nothing empirical about a standardized test. It is written, evaluated, and graded by human beings, just as capable of error as the subjects they are testing.

Considering that there has NEVER been any independent analysis or audit to provide validation or verification of CSAP, the question of accuracy remains unknown.^{iv}[\[iv\]](#) Cut scores are subjectively determined by testing officials and essay and short answer questions are judged by poorly trained people, with little or no teaching experience, earning \$9 an hour and working 12 hour days to meet the deadlines.^v[\[v\]](#) This makes standardized test scores far less informed than the judgments of professional teachers who assess their students each and every day!

“In recent years, the four testing companies that dominate the market have experienced serious breakdowns in quality control.” For example in May of 2000, NCS Pearson made multiple errors in scoring, assigning 47,000 Minnesota students lower scores than they deserved.^{vi}[\[vi\]](#) The company incorrectly lowered multiple-choice scores for 12,000 Arizona students, and was forced to re-score 204,000 tests in Washington because the state found the scores too generous. One error by McGraw-Hill resulted in nearly 9,000 students in New York City being mistakenly assigned to summer school in 1999.^{vii}[\[vii\]](#) “Testing specialists argue that educators and politicians must share the blame for the rash of testing errors because they are asking too much of the industry.”^{viii}[\[viii\]](#)

“Testing guarantees that children are learning the standards” -- The content covered on the CSAP is aligned with Colorado Content Standards. However, limitations in the construction of standardized tests such as testing time, printing, and judging and grading the measure, prohibit any in-depth probing of a student’s true understanding. In the zeal to quantify student learning, tests are crammed with content and sub content areas to be measured, none of which are measured thoroughly or completely, providing incomplete and inaccurate information.

The curriculum is then narrowed to cover only the subject represented on the test and learning is restricted to memorization of facts, simple single solutions, or “good guessing.” “Testing has now become a substitute for the curriculum instead of simply a *measure* of it.”ix[ix]

While we may experience success on test scores and conform to a preconceived standard of achievement, we have simultaneously diminished intellectual development and erased 20 years of research and experience.

“Standardized testing helps the United States to be competitive with other industrialized nations.” -- The United States is constantly held up as the most prosperous nation in the world, and has been leading nearly every industry for the past century. Our achievements are a result of the quality of American schools and the dedication and expertise of the highest trained teaching force in the world.

Standardized testing benefits the four major testing publishers: McGraw-Hill, Houghton-Mifflin, Pearson Assessments (formerly NCS), and Harcourt General, and allows for complete control over curriculum resources, teacher training, and other assessment tools, creating a monopoly over the “public education marketplace.” McGraw Hill, publishers of CSAP, reported profit of \$49 million in 1993 before high stakes testing; in 2003 with contracts in 26 states, profits - not revenue - exceeded \$321 million.x[x] Standardized testing really isn’t about competition between students, it’s about financial gains and competition over economic targets. The question of who benefits from accountability and the high-stakes testing craze grows increasingly clearer.

“Standardized testing is the most efficient way to measure a child’s performance.” -- “Efficiency” appears to be a key word in the debate over high stakes testing. Contracts vary from state to state and usually the costs claimed are only those for the development, publishing, and scoring of the test. School districts carry the most expensive burden of administering these lengthy exams. Hidden costs include teacher training, test-prep guides, time spent in class learning that particular test format and test-taking strategies, and proctoring the actual test. The estimated total costs for the Colorado State Assessment Program (CSAP) is 50 million dollars annually.xi[xi] Of course most districts use additional standardized tests such as ITBS, NAEP, PSAT, ACT, TERRA NOVA, etc., exacting an outrageous amount of money for testing at taxpayers expense.

Each content area of the CSAP exam is made up of 3 sessions, each lasting 50 minutes. Third through tenth graders test for 9 sessions (reading, writing, and mathematics). Three weeks of testing is required for eighth graders, who take 3 additional sessions on science.xii[xii] One to two weeks are granted for retakes or make-up sessions due to absences. Students are given 50 minutes per session, however, administration time is approximately 75 minutes for each session at the rate of one per

day. Districts vary in testing schedules and preparation time; some children begin in January while for others, test preparation continues throughout the year.

Looking at the costs spent on standardized tests and the time invested preparing the test-takers, it's hard to imagine how proponents can make the claim of "efficiency." For the same amount of money spent on CSAP last year, Colorado could have gained 1,500 new teachers and time spent on preparation and testing could have been spent on learning – what a concept!

"The public supports testing"—hmmm, do we? At the core of a democracy is not the economic system, or a national defense, not even the political structure; a democracy is contingent upon the people. When our educational system no longer promotes critical thinking, self-reflection, divergent learning, or empowered individuals, we have done more than corrupt the minds and hearts of our youth, we will have sacrificed our democracy and the viability of an entire country. What we cultivate in our children is equally as important as what we fail to cultivate. "If we do not begin now to promote genuine intellectual freedom in our public school classrooms – among our teachers and our students - the claim that we as a nation stand for "freedom" will be hollow."^{xiii}*[xiii]* Current state and federal reform initiatives deprive children of a challenging, meaningful, and a relevant education. "When the central aim of educational change is just to improve test scores, improved education is seldom the result."^{xiv}*[xiv]*

Ironically it is not just standardized tests and the CSAP that is at issue here; performance standards, and evaluating schools based entirely on test scores have all hindered educational improvement. The problem lies in the fact that we have transferred the crucial responsibility of informing, guiding, and monitoring the educational system to test publishers who have no accountability. Business leaders and policy makers, distantly removed from the students, have superseded the role of the professional educators in making vital school and classroom decisions that impact our children. Parents are evaluating the quality of schools on "data points" instead of doing the necessary work of observing, asking questions, and participating in the efforts of our schools to instill wisdom, integrity, and courage in our growing future. Teachers and administrators have too willingly signed away both their rights and responsibilities in promoting learning that is personalized, rigorous, and meaningful and now have all of the liability and none of the authority. Instead of educational improvement today's current reform system has reduced opportunities for disadvantaged children, demoralized our schools, narrowed the range of thought, paralyzed the imagination of a generation, and impeded our children's intrinsic motivation and the natural will to learn. Our educational institutions are the best hope for our future; when we as a nation ignore individualism and restrain intellectual freedom, we have diminished our capacity for greatness and limited our potential for the extraordinary.

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Endnotes

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xv[i] CTB/ McGraw-Hill developed under contract by Colorado Department of Education: “Guide to Test Interpretation,” 2003.

xvi[ii] Winter, Greg. “More Schools Rely on Tests, but Study Raises Doubts.” *The New York Times*. 28, December, 2002

xvii[iii] Berliner, David & Biddle, Bruce. (1995). *The Manufactured Crisis*. Addison Wesley

xviii[iv] Colorado Department of Education, *CSAP Essentials* webpage, “CSAP Interpretation Resources: Step-by-step process for understanding the CSAP,” 2003; Verified by McGraw-Hill

xix[v] Henriques, Steinberg. “Right Answer, Wrong Score: Test Flaws Take Toll.” *New York Times*, 20, May 2001.

xx[vi] Bracey, Gerald. “The Condition of Public Education.” *Phi Delta Kappan*, October, 2003.

xxi[vii] Henriques, Steinberg. 2001.

xxii[viii] Ibid

xxiii[ix] Eve Baker, co-director of the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards and Student testing at U.C.L.A. to the *New York Times*.

xxiv[x] 2004 Investor Fact book, Mc Graw-Hill

xxv[xi] Teachers’ salary spent on CSAP alone:
 $(\# \text{ days on CSAP} / \text{ days per year}) * (\text{Teacher salary}) * [\# \text{ teachers doing CSAP}] =$
 $[(5 \text{ days} / 200 \text{ days}) * (\$43,319)] * [44,975 * (8/13)] = \30 million
Fixed costs of CSAP = \$15 million
Annual cost = \$45 million
(# of student days, avg. teacher salary, #of CO teachers, provided by the Colorado Dept of Education)

xxvi[xii] Colorado Department of Education, *CSAP Essentials* webpage, “CSAP Interpretation Resources: Assessment Frameworks,” 2003.

xxvii[xiii] Wirsing, Marie. “PS #1 Charter and the Question of Resisting High-stakes Testing.” Panel presentation, 24, October, 2001.

xxviii[xiv] Ralston, Anthony. “Next Disaster in American Education: Rising Test Scores.” Found in *Phi Delta Kappan*, October 2003.

i[i] CTB/ McGraw-Hill developed under contract by Colorado Department of Education: “Guide to Test Interpretation,” 2003.

ii[ii] Winter, Greg. “More Schools Rely on Tests, but Study Raises Doubts.” *The New York Times*. 28, December, 2002

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