

The Mississippi Association for Assessment Reform Opposes High-Stakes Standardized Testing

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The Mississippi Association for Assessment Reform believes that standardized test scores should never stand as the sole measure of students' knowledge, understanding, and performance. We are therefore opposed to "high-stakes" standardized tests — state-administered tests that prohibit students from graduating or advancing to the next grade.

We believe schools, teachers, and students themselves can and should be held accountable for their performance as assessed by high standards. However, we assert that standardized tests do not adequately reflect students' true proficiencies. Furthermore, an emphasis on such tests diverts scarce funds and energy away from the high quality teaching and resources that promote active engagement and critical thinking and toward test preparation materials and "practice" activities.

The Mississippi Association for Assessment Reform affirms that tests and other assessments should support instruction and should not interrupt effective learning strategies. We actively promote the widespread adoption of multiple measures and performance-based assessments as more challenging and accurate demonstrations of student achievement.

More information about how the Mississippi Association for Assessment Reform supports effective assessment and opposes high-stakes standardized tests.

MAAR endorses broader, deeper, locally controlled high-stakes tests. If students are educated poorly and cannot demonstrate the competencies, understanding, skills, and habits that form the foundation of a successful adulthood, the stakes are frightfully high for those students and for society. We therefore believe passionately in high-stakes challenges that demonstrate learning and growth in equitable, educationally sound, and locally controlled ways.

Well-designed exhibitions, portfolios, and other such high-stakes learning assessments are broad and deep, requiring students to develop and use a wide range of skills as they publicly demonstrate mastery of the entire curriculum. Such assessments reflect progress and competence gained throughout years of schooling. Success in performance-based assessments depends on refinement, revision, attention to detail, and higher-order thinking skills. Such assessments demand environments in which each student is challenged to meet high standards set by the

school and by the community. And authentic assessments require teachers and learners to know each other well, so that all students are both nurtured and challenged to demonstrate competence across the curriculum.

Just as no two students are alike, and no two schools are alike, no two demonstrations of mastery that determine that students are ready to advance educationally ought to be alike. All students should meet and exceed minimum community-determined standards, and good schools base these expectations for achievement on national curriculum standards such as the Principles and Standards for School Mathematics from the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics. Schools then adapt specific curriculum and assessment to their local contexts, creating learning and assessment experiences that support each other, are meaningful to students, and publicly demonstrate student and school progress.

Resources are distributed inequitably among schools, so common measures such as high-stakes standardized tests are not effective measures of student and school progress.

The high-stakes assessments to which we are opposed are standardized assessments that are formulated and scored by the state or other outside authorities. They don't measure how well students have mastered the curriculum of their particular school. Rather, they assume that all students at all schools have studied the same curricula and can demonstrate the same sort of knowledge on a narrow assessment given under high-pressure circumstances. And they don't rely on the judgment of teachers, parents, mentors, employers, and peers — the people who best know students' growth, learning, and capabilities, and the people who have the most significant stake in students' successes.

These high-stakes standardized tests require all students to respond to the same questions under similar conditions. Moreover, their results override other information, so no matter how comprehensively students can demonstrate a record of growth, learning, and achievement, they are not permitted to graduate or advance to the next grade if they cannot pass state level high school exit exams.

Under the current No Child Left Behind federal legislation, the stakes of standardized tests are also high for schools, requiring all schools to meet a minimum test score standard or demonstrate predetermined yearly progress toward such standards. Should schools not meet these preset benchmarks, they can be labeled as failing and lose students, funds, and hope for a truly improved future.

High-stakes standardized tests can punish students for conditions they cannot control, such as run-down school buildings, under-skilled teachers,

large class sizes, and inadequate facilities. Penalizing students in inadequate learning conditions with such tests isn't fair; it reinforces and exacerbates existing inequity.

Many research studies have found that a higher percentage of certain student populations — low-income students, special education students, students whose first language is not English, and children of color — drop out of school in response to the high-stakes standardized testing barrier. There are also well-documented cases of students being insidiously pushed out of school so that their poor test performances don't tarnish a school's average scores.

If students do not have access to an adequate and equitable education, they end up being held accountable while the system is not. Policy makers and civic leaders must take responsibility and be held accountable for providing strong educational opportunities for all.

High-stakes standardized tests can derail good teaching. Studies have found that teachers change their pedagogy specifically to "teach to the test," rather than teaching in ways that promote active engagement and critical thinking. Research has yet to demonstrate that the use of high-stakes standardized tests leads to measurable, positive outcomes of student achievement or to increased efficacy of teaching practices. The pressure of high-stakes standardized tests narrows, distorts, and weakens the curriculum, impelling teachers to teach to the test rather than create rich, vibrant, culturally appropriate, individually challenging curriculum.

On the other hand, school-based authentic assessments not only provide a more equitable method for gauging student learning, but they inform pedagogy, elucidating for teachers what students are and are not understanding. Teachers can make mid-course corrections, refining their teaching and providing personal attention as needed for student mastery.

When standardized tests are the primary factor in accountability, educators succumb to the temptation to use the tests to define curriculum and focus instruction. Assessment drives curriculum and instruction. If assessment changes, curriculum and instruction must change as well. What is not tested is not taught, and what is taught does not include higher-order learning. At the extreme, school becomes a test prep program.

It is of course possible to use a standardized test and not let its limits control curriculum and instruction. However, this split focus can result in a school putting itself at risk for producing both lower test scores and portfolios and exhibitions that have been gravely compromised and that may be inadequate.

MAAR promotes the use of a public system of multiple measures and performance assessments.

People have a right to know how well schools are doing. However, state-administered high-stakes standardized tests indicate little of true significance. Instead, the Mississippi Association for Assessment Reform promotes the use of a system of multiple measures and performance assessments, which we believe is a more challenging and accurate gauge of students' abilities.

We strongly support the efforts of schools within districts, regions, or states to discuss and determine performance standards for major areas of competency across curricula and within skill sets. Agreements about performance standards within such realms as analytical writing, mathematical reasoning, application of scientific concepts, and evidence-based argument allow comparisons among schools; at the same time, schools are not bound to the constraints of a single high-stakes test. Ideally, states would be partners with schools, supporting the development of these performance assessment correlations.

We do believe that the process and results of student assessment should be made public and visible. Such results can reveal achievement among students who often suffer as a result of educational institutions' low expectations, as well as differences in performance from one community to another that can guide policymakers and funders to allocate more resources to struggling schools.