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### Standardized Testing: Teaching to the Test

“Read these instructions to yourself as I read them out loud. Today you are going to take a test that will determine your future...” Sound familiar?

Although not *exactly* worded like that, the subliminal messages from a proctor administering a test are clear: This test is indeed very important. All students take standardized tests during their educational career. There are a plethora of standardized tests on the market that gauge individual performance as well as school performance. Unfortunately, in the society that we live in, we have become too reliant on standardized testing through teaching to the test, mandated standards, and the SAT scores for college entrance is shown to have a correlation with family income.

One of the main flaws in standardized testing is that it requires schools to teach to a set of “standards” in order for students to do well on standardized testing. This could be fine for traditional schools, but for project-based learning schools such as San Diego’s *High Tech High*, this poses a difficulty in assessing the school.

In California, all schools that receive public funding are required to administer “Standardized Testing and Reporting”, more commonly referred to as STAR Testing to gauge the Academic Performance Index (API) of that school

(California Department of Education). The test is based on a set of “standards” that the California Department of Education deems appropriate for grade levels 2 through 11. There are strict mandates for when this test is administered, it must be administered when 85% of the school year (give or take 10 days). Because of this, educators feel the need to “teach to test” in order to make sure that the information that will show up on the test is taught by the deadline.

Teaching to the test is one of the main criticisms against standardized testing. Don Gilman states in his article, *Standardized Testing Fails to Make The Grade*, that teaching to the test is not the best method in education because

Different children learn in different ways... . . . Some learn best by hearing the information, some by writing it down, some by seeing it on the blackboard, whiteboard, overhead projector, or computer screen, and some learn best by a combination of these, and other, methods. By teaching to the test, educators are given little leeway to accommodate each child’s individual learning style. Add to that the fact that many standardized tests largely measure only how well a child can memorize facts, and you are starting to see a recipe for disaster.

At project-based learning schools such as High Tech High, they must take time out their schedules to prepare for standardized testing. Students can be in the middle of a long-term project and when it is test season again, they must put their project on hiatus to prepare for the test.

Standardized testing also takes away from the true nature of education. As High Tech High's CEO Larry Rosenstock states in his article *Standardized Testing*,

High Tech High is, almost by definition, contrary to standardized tests. It is a small learning community that strives for personalization instead of standardization, choice instead of uniformity, and creativity and personal discovery. When a society focuses on those things that can be measured, it diminishes the importance of those qualities that it is difficult to measure, such as: integrity, perseverance, inventiveness, etc.

High Tech High's API for 2008 was 785 out of 1000, down from 807 in 2007. Sister school High Tech High Media Arts received a 713 out of 1000 in 2008, and the scores continue to decline. In comparison, Westview High School in the Poway Unified School District, a traditional school that teaches with standards and textbooks, received an API of 843. While the API of the traditional high schools may be higher, students at project-based learning schools are actually learning more life skills, such as presentation and communication skills that complement the curriculum. For example, instead of reading in a textbook what the standards dictate to be taught about the first amendment to the US Constitution, students at project-based learning schools might assume a "affirmative" or "negative" position to an essential question related to the first amendment and run formal debates. With this scenario, students might not be covering all the "standards" that the Department of Education sets about the

amendments to the constitution, however, they are learning about argument and how to properly debate, a practical skill.

Those who believe we are not too reliant on standardized testing might say that the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 was set out to hold schools accountable for student education (No Child Left Behind Act of 2001). However, the No Child Left Behind Act actually hurts individuality of schools and mandates that teachers follow strict guidelines to educate all students. This is why this act has been commonly referred to as the “No Teacher Left Standing” act (Therese).

Lastly, a problem with standardized testing is evident with analysis of the statistics of the SAT, an exam that is believed to gauge how well a student will perform in college. Most universities require that the student take this test and score fairly good on it. Because of this, many “test prep” companies have formed to help students with the information that shows up on the tests. Even the SAT’s administrator, CollegeBoard, offers the “Official Study Guide”. Of course, there is a price tag for test prep materials. Because of this, students that come from a family with higher income tend to score better on the SAT because they can afford to be “taught to the test”. According to R. Cassie,

The overall SAT results were broken into 10 family-income blocks, beginning at less than \$10,000. They increase in \$10,000 increments to students with family income levels greater than \$100,000. Students from families with less than a \$10,000 income scored a mean of 429 in critical reading, which improved to 445 in the \$10,000 to \$20,000 income range. That score jumped in each of the next eight income groups, peaking at

549 with students from families earning more than \$100,000. The same trend occurred in math: Students at the lowest-end income level had a mean score of 457, which crept to 465, 474, 488, 501 and then 509 in the \$50,000-\$60,000 range. The numbers kept improving to a mean score of 564 at the \$100,000 and above level.

This shows that there is a direct correlation to family income and SAT scores, which causes a problem for socioeconomic disadvantaged youth that have potential to succeed in college.

As you can see, we have become too reliant on standardized testing due to the fact that teachers teach to the test, the correlation between test scores and family income, and that standards are mandated by the Department of Education, taking away from the true nature of education. While standardized testing is not the best way for assessment, unfortunately, there is not a way around it. It is driven by the need in our society for money. If money was not a factor, schools would not need to be ranked for funding, the schools would already have state of the art materials. If we can one day increase our budget for funding of education, we may be able to one day alleviate our reliance on standardized testing.

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