Standardized Tests Effectively Measure Student Achievement

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Standardized tests fairly and comprehensively measure student performance, thus directly benefiting students while holding teachers accountable. Students who study for a standardized test are more likely to complete their homework and watch less television than their peers. Thus, standardized test-taking develops habits that help students not only with the test but throughout life. While some teachers oppose standardized tests, most of their objections can be overcome through better test design and professional development programs.

President Barack Obama and leaders of the teachers’ unions disagree with the view of citizens that schools, educators, and students should be held accountable for their performance on standardized tests. Despite strong public support for testing programs, influential educators have defined standardized tests as beasts that should be removed from schools. To quote one prominent critic, Gerald Bracey, they are "infernal machines of social destruction." Political leaders have also revealed a deep misunderstanding about the purpose and use of standardized testing when they claim tests are too simple or too biased to measure up to the subjective judgments of educators themselves. Such claims are naive or deliberately misleading.

Good Measures of Student Performance

Research and experience show that standardized tests are generally good at measuring students’ knowledge, skills, and understanding because they are objective, fair, efficient, and comprehensive. For these reasons, they are used for decisions about admission to colleges, graduate programs, and professional schools as well as qualification and licensing for many skilled occupations and demanding professions such as law and medicine. Given the misleading information and expressed views of some politicians and union leaders, it is worthwhile to review here the more specific reasons for using standardized tests.

Student performance is a crucial element of a metaphorical three-legged stool that also includes standards and learning. When one leg is weak or missing, educational programs may be faulty, but if all three are strong, the programs can be strong. Standardized tests are used to measure the student performance leg of this stool.

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If standardized tests are misused, of course, the program and student learning may be defective. When standardized tests are used appropriately, a great deal can be learned about how well schools function. That information allows educators and policymakers to make better-informed conclusions about how much
students are learning, which in turn allows them to make better-informed decisions about improving programs.

Targeting Areas for Development

Students benefit directly when they take tests that offer information on how well they have mastered the material intended for learning. School reading and mathematics skills, for example, can be precisely specified and as students learn the skills, they benefit from ongoing information tailored to their specific individual progress. Computers streamline this process by providing immediate feedback about correct and incorrect responses far more quickly and with much greater patience than teachers and tutors can provide.

Other general skills can also be both taught and measured. Writing, for example, can be subdivided into rules of spelling and grammar as well as skills of organization and style. As students improve their writing, they benefit from quick, objective feedback that helps them assess their specific progress on each skill and sub-skill.

Educators can better help students when they know how a student's objective performance compares with others. It helps both educators and students if students discover their strengths and weaknesses. For instance, performance information helps identify weaknesses that might be improved with tutoring and diligent study. Strengths revealed by standardized tests can help identify notable talents to be further developed in college study and in specialized vocations.

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Standardized tests can provide such information at low costs and very little class time. Caroline Hoxby of Stanford University's Department of Economics and the Hoover Institution has estimated that that the costs of tests are less than 0.1 percent of total spending on K-12 education and amount to an average of less than $6 per student. A 50-item standardized test can be given in an hour or so and sample students' knowledge, understanding, and skills far more comprehensively than an essay test with only a few questions that can be answered in the same amount of time. This is not to say that students need no practice in writing, but such practice is better as a classroom exercise, a homework activity, or a term paper rather than an objective assessment of the many aspects of learning.

Encouraging Learning

Comparative studies by John Bishop of Cornell University provide evidence of the learning value of standardized tests. In one study, he found that countries requiring students to take nationally standardized tests showed higher test scores on international tests than those in countries not requiring such tests.

In a second study, Bishop found that U.S. students who anticipated having to pass a standardized test for high school graduation learned more science and math, were more likely to complete homework and talk with their parents about schoolwork, and watched less television than their peers who were not required to pass such exams. These constructive activities encourage students to concentrate on meeting standards
and monitoring their own time and progress—skills important for not only increased achievement but also increased success in life.

Still, there are those who oppose standardized tests for a variety of reasons.

**Objections Are Easily Countered**

Those who argue against standardized tests say that holding educators and students accountable for only mathematics and reading encourages them to neglect history and science. But this is an argument for comprehensive and systematic testing across the entire curriculum, not an argument against standardized tests themselves.

Responsible test-makers, moreover, do not purport to cover all the material the students are expected to learn. Tests sample only a small fraction, perhaps as little as 5 to 10 percent, of all content and skills—just as a national survey may interview as few as 1,500 people for an estimate, within a few percentage points, of national attitudes. Like a national survey that samples the major parts of the country, a standardized test can sample the multiple topics students are expected to learn.

Those who oppose standardized tests also argue that the tests can only measure simple facts that can be memorized. But tests assessing advanced understanding and judgment do exist. They may, for instance, require respondents to select the best idea from a group of different and compelling positions. They may require respondents to identify the best reason for action, the best interpretation of a set of ideas, or the best application of important principles. (Rather than the word "correct," the word "best" is often used because more than one answer may be correct to some degree, but only one is best.)

**Helping American Students Be More Globally Competitive**

K-12 students who practice demonstrating their knowledge and skills on standardized tests throughout their school career become better prepared to meet future educational, occupational, and professional goals. They will be ready for the standardized tests assessing complex achievement that are used for admission to selective colleges and graduate and professional schools. In addition, K-12 students will be prepared for tests required for occupational licensing for trades as well as for intellectually demanding professions such as law and medicine. The American Board of Internal Medicine, for example, uses multiple-choice, standardized tests to assess a physician's judgment before he can be certified in an advanced medical specialty.

Another complaint against standardized tests is that they cause stress among educators and students. But the world outside of school is demanding. Indeed, the knowledge economy increasingly demands more knowledge and better skills from workers, which require larger amounts of intense study of difficult subjects. Yet American students spend only about half the total study time that Asian students do in regular schools, in tutoring schools, and in homework, a major reason for their poor performance relative to Asian and European students in international surveys. Thus, some reasonable pressure and objective
performance measurements are advisable for the future welfare of the students and the nation.

Good student performance on tests should be a source of satisfaction among successful educators.

When students can see their progress toward attaining standards, moreover, undue pressure can be mitigated and their incremental progress may motivate them. As in games and sports, practice and accountability can enhance performance. Just as difficulty levels established in recreational activities are common, testing programs allow educators to accommodate their curriculum to better meet the needs of students with different achievement levels. Teachers can use test results to identify and respond directly to the specific needs of individual students by giving special help to those who fall behind and accelerating or enriching learning for advanced students.

Taking Pride in Student Achievement

Finally, some critics of testing complain that tests cause educators malaise. But good schools focus on student learning, not on the satisfaction of the professional staff. If the data show that testing benefits students, it should be pursued even if there isn't unanimous teacher support. Professionals should take pride in seeing good results from their work, and because testing reveals good work and aids rather than detracts from instruction, teachers should embrace it and even get paid for the good performance of their students.

Much of teacher dissatisfaction with testing is attributable to a lack of familiarity with why testing is necessary and how good tests are designed and administered. Often, a particular teacher's opposition is based on a past experience in which a test was poorly designed, not aligned with the curriculum, or incorrectly administered. Professional development programs that include guidance on how to align classroom activities with achievement standards can address these problems. In one study, teachers were able to see the shortcomings of tests they designed and, thus, learned how to devise better tests. As a result, the teachers also gained respect for standardized tests designed by testing specialists.

Good student performance on tests should be a source of satisfaction among successful educators. The appropriate tests can reveal strengths and weaknesses in the curriculum and instruction. Our nation's poor achievement progress shows that substantial improvements in teaching and learning are needed—and progress on those two fronts can and should be measured by standardized tests.

Further Readings

Books


Periodicals and Internet Sources

- John R. Tanner "Incomplete Measures: In K-12 Accountability, Are We Answering the Wrong Questions Well and the Right Questions Poorly?" *School Administrator,* February 2010.


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