

## **Standardized Scam**

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Imagine being in a secluded room filled with anxious energy as you sit down to take a test that will determine your academic future. Your heart is racing, and your palms are sweating. You cannot focus as you are thinking through a million different formulas and strategies. That was merely a snippet of the grueling experience of taking a standardized test. Proponents of standardized testing argue that these tests provide a fair and objective way to measure students' knowledge and abilities. They believe that standardized testing is an effective tool for assessing student learning, evaluating the quality of educational programs etc. As a society we view individuals who perform well on standardized tests as intelligent and have a higher potential for success in their academic and professional goals. On the contrary, those who do not perform well on standardized tests may be perceived as less intelligent and may be less likely to achieve academic or professional success. It is crucial that we recognize the impact that these tests can have on an individual's self-worth and future opportunities. Students who score poorly on these tests may internalize the belief that they are not smart enough or not capable of achieving their academic or professional goals. This can lead to a lack of confidence, which can hinder their

future success. It's also worth noting that standardized testing is often used as a key factor in college admissions and job applications, which can further reinforce the idea that one's worth is determined by their test scores. It is important to recognize that standardized tests measure a narrow range of cognitive abilities and does not necessarily reflect an individual's full potential or aptitude in other areas. Furthermore, there are other elements that support my belief that it is a flawed and ineffective tool for evaluating student learning, including socioeconomic position, cultural and linguistic differences, and test anxiety, all of which may affect a person's performance on the exam.

It is widely recognized that wealthier students have an advantage on standardized tests. There are numerous systemic challenges that are detrimental to low-income individuals attempting these assessments. According to the College Board (2019), which creates the SAT, collected data showing that students from families with an annual income of more than \$200,000 scored an average of 388 points higher on the SAT than those from families making less than \$20,000 annually. Spark Admissions (2021) further dives into this by emphasizing the inequality when it comes to standardized testing, "In addition to being unfair to low-income students, standardized tests often misrepresent the academic abilities of English Language Learner (ELL) students and students with special needs. Although testing accommodations exist, these tests are still designed with a particular student in mind." When looking at this with a broader lens, it implies that standardized testing is not a reliable indicator of academic ability and can be unfair to some student groups, especially those who originate from low-income families, are ELLs (English Language Learner), or have special needs. This supports the notion that other factors, such as a student's GPA (Grade Point Average) and extracurricular activities, should be taken into account when assessing their academic potential. When it comes to standardized testing it is not only affecting students, but teachers as well.

When teachers' evaluations are based on how well their students perform on standardized exams, they may be more inclined to prioritize test preparation over other crucial components of the curriculum. As a result, the curriculum may become more limited and place less of an emphasis on critical thinking, creativity, and other abilities that are difficult to assess using standardized tests. According to *The Public School Review*, Kate Barrington (2023) argues that "too much time is spent preparing students for standardized tests instead of making sure that they actually learn and understand the material, so they can apply that knowledge throughout their education and their lives." This statement highlights that when teacher evaluations are based solely on standardized test scores, it can have a negative impact on the overall quality of education. As specified by Tim Walker of *National Education Association*, "Results from a 2015 survey of more than 1500 NEA members teaching the grades and subjects required to be tested under No Child Left Behind (grades 10-12 in ELA and math) indicate that a vast majority of these educators' 70 percent - do not believe their primary state assessment is developmentally appropriate for their students. Developmental appropriateness, according to the NEA survey, is just one of many requirements a standardized test must meet to be "most useful." We can also see this negatively impact teacher's mental health, according to *Education Week* "The reforms were also demoralizing for teachers, said Rebecca Garelli, a science education consultant who taught for 14 years and left the classroom partly because of the increased focus on student test scores." Teachers focusing too much on test preparation, can lead to a more limited curriculum and a lack of emphasis on critical thinking and other essential skills that are difficult to measure using standardized tests. However, the negative impact of standardized testing goes beyond its effect on education. In fact, there is ample evidence that standardized testing has a long history of racism since it has been used to systematically disadvantage low-income areas and kids of color in order to maintain inequality.

Moreover, beyond the negative impact on education, standardized testing in the United States has a well-documented history of racism and discrimination. When most of us look at standardized tests, we don't see the ugly past that has changed and corrupted our current system. According to the Chicago

Education Advocacy Cooperative (2021), “Standardized testing was first introduced during World War One, but not as an academic device. Developed by eugenicist and racist Carl Brigham, these aptitude tests were used to divide soldiers into battalions segregated by race and test score. Brigham believed that the education system was declining at the time due to the increasing diversity of the student body and the increasing immigration of non-white people into the United States.” This highlights how standardized testing has been used historically to maintain inequality and disadvantage low-income areas and children of color. Furthermore, standardized testing has been criticized for perpetuating for maintaining the educational system's systemic injustices. Students from wealthier families have access to better resources and educational opportunities that can better prepare them for standardized tests, giving them an unfair advantage over their peers from low-income families. The origins of standardized tests can be traced back to eugenics and racism, which starts to raise questions about its use as an educational tool.

In contrast to the historical use of standardized testing to maintain inequality and perpetuate systemic injustices, standardized testing is a method of evaluating a student's academic performance based on a fixed set of questions, formats, and scoring rubrics. While it provides a convenient way to compare and rank students' academic abilities, it can also undermine creativity, critical thinking, and innovation in several ways. As a student who has been through standardized testing, I am constantly staring at multiple-choice questions for hours and sitting for an extended period of time can be tiring, so it can be difficult to maintain focus and concentration. I experience extreme anxiety or pressure to perform well on a standardized test. Test results can have significant consequences, such as determining college acceptance or job opportunities. As a result, not only me but for many students out there, it can cause pressure to succeed, or fear of failure, which can affect performance. I am a prime example of this: I work hard to achieve success and try my best to be an exceeding student. The first time taking the SAT, I experienced extreme anxiety. I was so afraid of not doing well that I couldn't sleep or eat properly in the days leading up to the test. When I finally took the exam, I froze up and I couldn't remember anything that I had studied from the following weeks. Which resulted in me scoring lower than I had expected, and

it started to take a toll on my confidence and self-esteem. Many students at my school and others have had bad experiences with standardized testing, which can undermine creativity, critical thinking, and innovation in several ways. It can limit our exposure to innovative ideas, create a stressful environment, and promote a narrow focus on test preparation rather than fostering a love of learning and exploration. It is important to recognize these issues and work towards creating a more diverse and inclusive educational system that values creativity, critical thinking, and innovation. As stated in The Vindicator (2019), “Standardized tests do not consider how students think, but rather just test for the answer. This causes all teachers to teach in a specific way, blocking creative thinking. This files down the community of students to become drones in a sense because they lack the ability to self-express because they’re no longer taught to.” It is important for educators to be aware of these limits and work towards developing a more wide comprehensive method of teaching that fosters creativity, critical thinking, and problem-solving while still making sure that we are prepared for standardized testing.

Alternative methods for standardized testing can help to promote creativity, critical thinking, and innovation by incorporating open-ended questions, formative assessments, technology, and cultural responsiveness. By doing so, we can create a more comprehensive and equitable approach to assessing student learning and development. According to the University of the People, “instead of using standardized tests, these alternative methods have evolved that can take their place: multiple measures, prospective candidates submit portfolios to showcase their work, sampling, inspections” (Singh, 2021). For example, a portfolio assessment involves the collection of a student's work overtime. Teachers can assign projects throughout the year, and students can choose the projects they believe most accurately reflect what they have learned. They can construct their own portfolio and have control over their own work this way. It also enables students to concentrate on what they are truly interested in. These alternative methods provide opportunities for students to display their skills and knowledge in a more personalized and meaningful way. They can also consider students' diverse backgrounds and experiences,

making the assessment process more culturally responsive and inclusive. Therefore, adopting alternative methods of assessment can benefit both students and teachers by creating a more inclusive and equitable educational system. Stress and anxiety are something I deal with daily, so having these alternative methods can also reduce stress and anxiety in students and improve our mental health by allowing them to demonstrate their understanding in a variety of ways rather than relying solely on test scores.

As someone who has been through standardized testing, I know the emotional and socioeconomic factors that go into these tests. I remember feeling extremely nervous and overwhelmed while taking my SAT exam, and I also saw firsthand how students from disadvantaged backgrounds faced additional challenges in these high-pressure environments. I know fellow students out there can make a difference and can encourage teachers and educators to incorporate more innovative and creative teaching methods in their classrooms. By staying informed and advocating for policies that prioritize learning over test scores, we can help create a more equitable and effective education system for all. One thing is certain: whether you breeze through it or struggle through it, the adrenaline-pumping experience of taking a standardized test will stay with you long after you turn in your answer sheet.

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