

Senate Bill 6 – Abolishing Standardized Testing

Don't Ditch Standardized Tests. Fix Them.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/17/opinion/standardized-tests.html>

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According to The New York Post's analysis of New York State Education Department data, "Nearly 200,000 students — or one out of five — refused to sit for the state's standardized reading and math exams for grades 3-8 administered in the spring" of 2023.

That number surprised me. There's certainly some precedent for it, but I thought that the educational havoc wreaked by the Covid pandemic might have dampened the popularity of the opt-out movement — the tide of parents who've chosen to exempt their kids from state standardized testing. Apparently not.

Opt-out proponents argue, among other things, that "one-size-fits-all tests punish and discourage students who are already vulnerable" and "the tests themselves become the focus of education." But after the major disruptions of 2020-22, I figured that even test-skeptical parents might reconsider the value of getting a straightforward accounting of learning loss that compared the progress of kids across schools and districts — to know whether their children are still playing catch-up post-pandemic.

I also thought that damning revelations in recent years about "balanced literacy" — a method focused on "developing a love of books and ensuring students understand the meaning of stories," as the Times education reporter Sarah Mervosh described it — which was shown to be less effective than phonics ("systematic, sound-it-out instruction"), would make parents realize that standardized testing is an important part of developing the best curriculum possible.

Without testing, it would have been harder for the public to discover that balanced literacy doesn't work very well. As Mervosh reported last year in an overview of the "revolt" against balanced literacy, "The push for reform picked up in 2019, when national reading scores showed significant improvement in just two places: Mississippi and Washington, D.C. Both had required more phonics."

Opposition to standardized testing isn't new, but it is especially prominent in New York, which has been described as a "national epicenter" of the opt-out movement. As The Times reported in 2015, resistance to standardized exams "began to snowball after 2013, the first year that the Common Core academic standards became the basis for judging student performance in New York." In the past decade, an opt-out rate around 20 percent hasn't been uncommon.

But despite reforms in New York and elsewhere, the broader conversation about standardized testing has stalled.

As Freddie deBoer, the author of "The Cult of Smart: How Our Broken Education System Perpetuates Social Injustice," told me, "This is a situation that drives me crazy because it presumes that the two alternatives are hours of high-stakes testing for every student every year or no testing at all."

It doesn't have to be this way, he said, because there's a third option: fixing the tests — state tests, in particular — to be more useful and effective. DeBoer said the National Assessment of Educational Progress, a test that all students don't take every year, is often thought of as "the gold standard." It is administered annually to a stratified, nationally representative sample of kids — typically around 2,500 per state, according to the National Center for Education Statistics.

Additionally, there are a handful of places currently working on testing reforms that address many of the issues that parents have with state-administered tests, including concerns that they're too long, don't really capture the depth of what students know and the results come in too late — sometimes not until summer break or the following school year — to provide usable information to classroom teachers.

Allie Pearce, a K-12 policy analyst at the left-leaning Center for American Progress, said, "Florida and Texas both recently launched through-year assessment pilot programs." Instead of one long test taken in the spring of the school year, with results that don't come in until that school year is over, through-year testing provides "three testing opportunities throughout the year" and then schools "make data available to educators," sometimes as quickly as within a week, Pearce told me. That way, parents and educators have "near-immediate information on how students are doing."

I talked to Iris Tian, deputy commissioner of analytics, assessment and reporting at the Texas Education Agency, about her state's through-year assessment pilot, which is currently in its second year. Before students even sharpen a pencil, she said, "every question gets reviewed and approved by a group of current Texas teachers. We actually field-test each of the questions" to make sure it's not biased. The assessment creators also get continual feedback from the schools to make sure that the information teachers and principals are getting from the tests is actually useful to them.

In the pilot, the three tests take place in the fall, winter and spring, and part of their research involves figuring out how short they can make the test while still being able to provide a valid statistical picture of where students are, Tian explained. They're also redesigning the test so that it more closely mirrors "what's happening in classrooms throughout the year" and is supportive of classroom instruction, rather than forcing teachers to teach to the test, a frequent complaint parents and teachers have about standardized testing.

One way the test is being modified? Fewer multiple-choice questions, Tian said. "We all know if all you're doing in classrooms day in and day out during the school year is giving multiple choice questions, that's not how kids learn."

Having quality information about how America's children are learning is critical, particularly since the educational gaps between the haves and the have-nots were exacerbated by the pandemic. As Tom Kane and Sean Reardon explained in a guest essay for Opinion in May:

In 2019, the typical student in the poorest 10 percent of districts scored one and a half years behind the national average for his or her year — and almost four years behind students in the richest 10 percent of districts — in both math and reading.

By 2022, the typical student in the poorest districts had lost three-quarters of a year in math, more than double the decline of students in the richest districts. The declines in reading scores were half as large as in math and were similarly much larger in poor districts than rich districts. The pandemic left students in low-income and predominantly minority communities even further behind their peers in richer, whiter districts than they were.

Without standardized testing, we won't know where to put the most resources, or what the contours of the problems students face even look like. Getting rid of widespread assessments won't help the most vulnerable children; it will only leave us without knowledge about how best to support them.

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Why we need to move beyond standardized testing

How an outdated system designed for the Industrial Revolution came to define schools today.

<https://standtogether.org/stories/education/we-need-to-move-beyond-standardized-testing>

Can welding a horseshoe count as a math test? At Northern Cass School in Fargo, North Dakota, the answer is a resounding yes!

The American education system has long been obsessed with tests, but have we stopped to ask if students actually benefit from them? With education's heavy emphasis on standardized tests, it could be easy to assume that evidence supports the positive impacts of testing students — but no such evidence exists.

“Let's blow up the system and give kids some control over their education,” proposed Dr. Corey Steiner, superintendent of Northern Cass School.

Stand Together journalist Justin Toops recently asked two crucial questions: Why do schools use high-stakes testing? And is there a better way to measure learning?

Looking for answers, Toops took a film crew to observe Northern Cass — a public school — and One Stone School — a private school run by students.

But first things first: How did we get here?

Standardized testing serves an outdated version of the U.S.

Where did standardized testing come from, anyway?

“I think it's worth going back and looking at the history of standardized testing in the U.S.,” said Kerry McDonald, senior fellow at the Foundation for Economic Education. “It was really focused on obedience and compliance and order and efficiency.”

Standardized testing became popular around the same time as mass compulsory schooling. In mid-19th century America, testing and mass schooling composed the de facto education model for training youth to join the workforce of the Industrial Revolution. Testing data became a new standard for metrics to compare and rank schools — allowing schools to compete for students and funding.

For decades, K-12 education has focused on standardized testing. But there's no evidence that this model actually increases success in later life.

But this model has a huge blindspot: It doesn't recognize students as individuals.

"As this compulsory schooling spread throughout the U.S., standardized testing also spread with it, and it really creates this artificial version of learning," said McDonald.

Testing can't show whether students have internalized knowledge. Standardized testing has become a superficial way for U.S. schools to outperform each other — on paper. The fallout from this model continued for decades, pressuring teachers to deliver results at all costs and creating a culture of stress, anxiety, and depression among students.

2001: The year that put the stress in tests

In 2001, the No Child Left Behind Act changed things — and not necessarily in a good way.

This new law introduced the idea of holding schools accountable for ensuring student "success" — measured via testing. With No Child Left Behind, the "customer" in education shifted from students in the classroom to government policymakers. It fell to educators, parents, and students to deliver results that would ensure schools continued to receive government funding.

"This supercharged standardized testing in the American schooling system," said McDonald.

When NCLB was introduced, the United States was globally ranked No. 18 in math, No. 14 in science, and No. 15 in reading. There was a lot of pressure to get ahead of those numbers and increase student performance. But in real life, "holding schools accountable" turned into something way more impactful: punishment for schools if students' test scores weren't up to par.

Policymakers intended to incentivize improvement among educators, but the reality was that teachers could lose their jobs if students didn't perform well on standardized tests. Teachers shifted their focus from student learning to test outcomes. Many educators even resorted to cheating or misrepresenting students' scores.

In 2014, researchers found that 191 teachers in 70 schools across the Washington, D.C., area were falsifying students' test scores, even going so far as to erase wrong answers and insert correct ones.

When the Every Student Succeeds Act was introduced in 2015, it appeared to offer welcome relief for both students and educators. A replacement for No Child Left Behind, ESSA eased many of the previous prescriptive requirements for measuring student success — but it still enforced testing and student achievement frameworks in schools.

It quickly became apparent that ESSA was essentially No Child Left Behind in a new package.

“Even though the No Child Left Behind Act was eventually replaced by the Every Student Succeeds Act, there is still this expectation of regular standardized testing,” McDonald said. “The downside of that is that it really created a culture of teaching and testing. Teachers and administrators were being held accountable to the government. It inevitably led to an environment in which teachers were teaching to a test, whether they wanted to or not.”

According to the National Institutes of Health, up to 40% of students experience testing anxiety. This overwhelms the parts of the brain used for reading, comprehension, and processing.

In other words: Instead of learning and retaining information, students’ brains are being rewired to focus on memorizing information solely for tests. The higher a student’s testing anxiety, the worse they’ll do, no matter how well they have learned the material elsewhere.

“It creates this culture of doing well on a test, whether or not you’re actually learning that information,” said McDonald. “Maybe you’re just being tested on it and being able to regurgitate for that test, and then you’re forgetting it.”

Obsession with test performance deprives students of the freedom to explore their unique goals, strengths, and learning styles.

“Standardized testing measures a very narrow part of the human experience,” McDonald said. “More and more parents are recognizing that, and they want an education system today that’s more reflective of the personalization that we enjoy in every other area of our lives but that’s been lacking in American education.”

Testing isn’t useless for measuring student learning. However, it only offers a snapshot of student comprehension and should be used as one of several methods for gauging understanding and mastery.

“I think that there’s no one right way of approaching education,” McDonald said. “I think that’s why so many parents are excited about these emerging, unconventional education models, [and] letting students’ interests and passions guide that learning model that’s not forcing young people into a standardized box.”

So, what are the alternatives?

In our next two articles, Toops visits seemingly impossible realities: a private school that demonstrates how to make report cards a thing of the past and a public school where state mandates and personalized education co-exist. Both show what might be possible if we move away from tradition and look toward a brighter future for every individual student.

What Toops and his crew discover could completely change Americans’ beliefs about what it means to learn — and the purpose of “school.”