

## Is the use of standardized tests improving education in America?

Standardized tests have been a part of American education since the mid-1800s. Their use skyrocketed after 2002's No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) mandated annual testing in all 50 states. US students slipped from 18th in the world in math in 2000 to 31st place in 2009, with a similar decline in science and no change in reading. Failures in the education system have been blamed on rising poverty levels, teacher quality, tenure policies, and increasingly on the pervasive use of standardized tests.

Proponents argue that standardized tests are a fair and objective measure of student ability, that they ensure teachers and schools are accountable to taxpayers, and that the most relevant constituents – parents and students – approve of testing.

Opponents say the tests are neither fair nor objective, that their use promotes a narrow curriculum and drill-like "teaching to the test," and that excessive testing undermines America's ability to produce innovators and critical thinkers.

Standardized tests are defined by W. James Popham, former president of the American Educational Research Association, as "any test that's administered, scored, and interpreted in a standard, predetermined manner." The tests often have multiple-choice questions that can be quickly graded by automated test scoring machines. Some tests also incorporate open-ended questions that require human grading, which is more expensive, though computer software is being developed to grade written work also.

Many kinds of standardized tests are in use, but high-stakes achievement tests have provoked the most controversy. These assessments carry important consequences for students, teachers and schools: low scores can prevent a student from progressing to the next grade level or lead to teacher firings and school closures, while high scores ensure continued federal and local funding and are used to reward teachers and administrators with bonus payments. Standardized testing in the US has been estimated to be "a multi-billion-dollar industry," though proponents have accused opponents of exaggerating its size.

### Did You Know?

1. Following the passage of NCLB on Jan. 8, 2002, annual state spending on standardized tests rose from \$423 million to almost \$1.1 billion in 2008 (a 160% increase compared to a 19.22% increase in inflation over the same period), according to the Pew Center on the States.
2. 93% of studies have found student testing, including the use of large-scale and high-stakes standardized tests, to have a "positive effect" on student achievement, according to a peer-reviewed, 100-year analysis of testing research completed in 2011 by testing scholar Richard P. Phelps.
3. On Mar. 14, 2002, the *Sacramento Bee* reported that "test-related jitters, especially among young students, are so common that the Stanford-9 exam comes with instructions on what to do with a test booklet in case a student vomits on it."
4. China, a country with a long tradition of standardized testing, topped all countries in the international rankings for reading, math, and science in 2009 when it debuted on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) charts.
5. The current use of No. 2 pencils on standardized tests is a holdover from the 1930s through the 1960s, when scanning machines scored answer sheets by detecting the electrical conductivity of graphite pencil marks.

## Pro & Con Arguments: "Is the Use of Standardized Tests Improving Education in America?"

### PRO Standardized Tests

1. **Standardized tests are reliable and objective measures of student achievement.** Without them, policy makers would have to rely on tests scored by individual schools and teachers who have a vested interest in producing favorable results. Multiple-choice tests, in particular, are graded by machine and therefore are not subject to human subjectivity or bias.
2. **Standardized tests are inclusive and non-discriminatory because they ensure content is equivalent for all students.** Former Washington, DC, schools chancellor Michelle Rhee argues that using alternate tests for minorities or exempting children with disabilities would be unfair to those students: "You can't separate them, and to try to do so creates two, unequal systems, one with accountability and one without it. This is a civil rights issue."
3. **"Teaching to the test" can be a good thing because it focuses on essential content and skills, eliminates time-wasting activities that don't produce learning gains, and motivates students to excel.** The US Department of Education stated in Nov. 2004 that "if teachers cover subject matter required by the standards and teach it well, then students will master the material on which they will be tested--and probably much more."
4. **Most parents approve of standardized tests.** A June-July 2013 Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research poll found that 75% of parents say standardized tests "are a solid measure of their children's abilities" and 69% say the tests "are a good measure of the schools' quality." 93% of parents say standardized tests "should be used to identify areas where students need extra help" and 61% say their children "take an appropriate number of standardized tests."
5. **Testing is not too stressful for students.** The US Department of Education

### CON Standardized Tests

1. **Standardized testing has not improved student achievement.** After No Child Left Behind (NCLB) passed in 2002, the US slipped from 18th in the world in math on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) to 31st place in 2009, with a similar drop in science and no change in reading. A May 26, 2011, National Research Council report found no evidence test-based incentive programs are working: "Despite using them for several decades, policymakers and educators do not yet know how to use test-based incentives to consistently generate positive effects on achievement and to improve education."
2. **Standardized tests are unfair and discriminatory against non English speakers and students with special needs.** English language learners take tests in English before they have mastered the language. Special education students take the same tests as other children, receiving few of the accommodations usually provided to them as part of their Individualized Education Plans (IEP).
3. **Standardized tests measure only a small portion of what makes education meaningful.** According to late education researcher Gerald W. Bracey, PhD, qualities that standardized tests cannot measure include "creativity, critical thinking, resilience, motivation, persistence, curiosity, endurance, reliability, enthusiasm, empathy, self-awareness, self-discipline, leadership, civic-mindedness, courage, compassion, resourcefulness, sense of beauty, sense of wonder, honesty, integrity."
4. **NCLB tests are drastically narrowing the curriculum.** A national 2007 study by the Center on Education Policy reported that since 2001, 44% of school districts had reduced the time spent on science, social studies and the arts by an average of 145 minutes per week in order to focus on reading and math. A 2007 survey of 1,250 civics, government, and social studies teachers showed that 75% of those teaching current events less often cited standardized tests as the reason.

stated: "Although testing may be stressful for some students, testing is a normal and expected way of assessing what students have learned." A Nov. 2001 University of Arkansas study found that "the vast majority of students do not exhibit stress and have positive attitudes towards standardized testing programs." Young students vomit at their desks for a variety of reasons, but only in rare cases is this the result of testing anxiety.

6. **Most teachers acknowledge the importance of standardized tests and do not feel their teaching has been compromised.** In a 2009 Scholastic/Gates Foundation survey, 81% of US public school teachers said state-required standardized tests were at least "somewhat important" as a measure of students' academic achievement, and 27% said they were "very important" or "absolutely essential." 73% of teachers surveyed in a Mar. 2002 Public Agenda study said they "have not neglected regular teaching duties for test preparation."
7. **Standardized tests provide a lot of useful information at low cost, and consume little class time.** According to a 2002 paper by Caroline M. Hoxby, PhD, the Scott and Donya Bommer Professor in Economics at Stanford University, standardized tests cost less than 0.1% of K-12 education spending, totaling \$5.81 per student per year: "Even if payments were 10 times as large, they would still not be equal to 1 percent of what American jurisdictions spend on education." Other cost estimates range from \$15-\$33 per student per year by the nonpartisan US Government Accountability Office (GAO), to as low as \$2 per student per year by testing scholar and economist Richard P. Phelps. A 50-item standardized test can be given in an hour and is graded instantaneously by computer.
8. **The multiple-choice format used on standardized tests produces accurate information necessary to assess and improve American schools.** According to the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, multiple-choice questions can provide "highly reliable test scores" and an "objective measurement of

5. **Testing is expensive and costs have increased since NCLB, placing a burden on state education budgets.** According to the Texas Education Agency, the state spent \$9 million in 2003 to test students, while the cost to Texas taxpayers from 2009 through 2012 is projected to be around \$88 million per year.
6. **The billion dollar testing industry is notorious for making costly and time-consuming scoring errors.** NCS Pearson, which has a \$254 million contract to administer Florida's Comprehensive Assessment Test, delivered the 2010 results more than a month late and their accuracy was challenged by over half the state's superintendents. [After errors and distribution problems in 2004-2005, Hawaii replaced test publisher Harcourt with American Institutes for Research, but the latter had to re-grade 98,000 tests after students received scores for submitting blank test booklets.
7. **America is facing a "creativity crisis," as standardized testing and rote learning "dumb down" curricula and jeopardize the country's economic future.** A 2010 College of William & Mary study found Americans' scores on the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking have been dropping since 1990, and researcher Kyung-Hee Kim lays part of the blame on the increase in standardized testing: "If we neglect creative students in school because of the structure and the testing movement... then they become underachievers."
8. **Finland topped the international education (PISA) rankings from 2001-2008, yet has "no external standardized tests used to rank students or schools,"** according to Stanford University researchers Linda Darling-Hammond and Laura McCloskey. Success has been achieved using "assessments that encourage students to be active learners who can find, analyze, and use information to solve problems in novel situations."

student achievement." Today's multiple-choice tests are more sophisticated than their predecessors. The Center for Public Education, a national public school advocacy group, says many "multiple-choice tests now require considerable thought, even notes and calculations, before choosing a bubble."

9. **Stricter standards and increased testing are better preparing school students for college.** In Jan. 1998, Public Agenda found that 66% of college professors said "elementary and high schools expect students to learn too little." By Mar. 2002, after a surge in testing and the passing of NCLB, that figure dropped to 47% "in direct support of higher expectations, strengthened standards and better tests."
10. **Physicians, lawyers, real-estate brokers and pilots all take high-stakes standardized tests to ensure they have the necessary knowledge for their professions.** If standardized tests were an unreliable source of data, their use would not be so widespread.

9. **Schools feeling the pressure of NCLB's 100% proficiency requirement are "gaming the system" to raise test scores,** according to an Arizona State University report in the June 22, 2009, edition of the peer-reviewed *International Journal of Education Policy & Leadership*. Low-performing students are "encouraged to stay home" on test days or "counseled to quit or be suspended" before tests are administered. State education boards are "lowering the bar": manipulating exam content or scoring so that tests are easier for students to pass.
10. **An obsession with testing robs children of their childhoods.** NCLB's mandate begins in third grade, but schools test younger students so they will get used to taking tests. Mar. 2009 research from the Alliance for Childhood showed "time for play in most public kindergartens has dwindled to the vanishing point, replaced by lengthy lessons and standardized testing." A three-year study completed in Oct. 2010 by the Gesell Institute of Human Development showed that increased emphasis on testing is making "children feel like failures now as early as PreK..."