

## **Standardized Testing - An Overview**

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I have been in education for 30+ years and a school administrator in the state of Michigan for the past 21 ½ years. The one consistent concept that I have had to deal with is school reform. While school reform has not been the same throughout my career, there have been many variations of school reform of which most have not been effective. Ronald Reagan was the last president who felt that education should be under local control. Since George H.W. Bush, the federal government has played an increasing role in the education system of the United States. With the passing of “No Child Left Behind” during George W. Bush’s presidency, the foundation was set to hold schools and teachers more accountable. While I agree that educators should be held accountable for the education of the students, I feel it is equally important to not limit the teachers in the curriculum they can teach and the methods they use to teach the content.

As a young teacher, I was trained to believe that drill and practice, multiple choice questions and teaching to the test were not acceptable as teaching methods. These strategies did not help develop higher levels of comprehension and understanding of academic content, but instead instilled information in short-term memory, which would allow students to apply knowledge to the tests, but not to life situations. But now, these practices are utilized in most classrooms without any real thought given to whether the instruction is meeting the long-term educational needs of the students. Education has shifted its focus away from using creative instructional methods that would require the students to apply their knowledge in a manner that would increase comprehension, to instructing students so there will be better results on the standardized tests. In other words instilling knowledge in the short-term memory just to ensure they will do better on multiple choice tests. Why wouldn’t the teaching staff make this a priority? Their evaluations and jobs may depend on the student achievement levels on the standardized tests.

What do standardized tests accomplish and are they truly a measurement of student comprehension and proficiency levels? Are standardized tests a reliable form of student assessment? Are they a consistent valid form of student assessment? Because standardized tests are controversial, questions have been asked since the inception of the multiple choice tests by Frederick J. Kelly in 1914. Some of the issues regarding tests of this type are that the questions concentrate on lower-order thinking skills. In our youth today there is an inadequate level of higher order thinking skills. Standardized testing does not require students to think critically or engage in problem solving strategies. If truth be told, research has indicated that high school grade point averages

are a better indicator of student success in the freshman year of college than the SAT or ACT.

Consequently, many creative strategies have been omitted from the classroom. There has been a decrease in the emphasis of critical thinking skills; they are not needed to do well on standardized tests. There has been a decrease in allowing students to develop creative skills; fine arts are not tested. Forget the fact that in order to be able to be an effective problem solver, a person has to have the ability to be able to demonstrate some creativity. That is the reason why many schools have started to phase out certain programs due to financing and budget cuts. These programs, such as choir, band, orchestra, art classes and shop classes. Students are not tested on those subjects and they are not part of the 4 common core areas that are currently being tested. The omission of this creativity and the decrease in the priority of strategies that implement higher order thinking skills may be the reason why college professors and employers say that the skills that students are lacking today are the ability to think critically and communicate. I think it is interesting that these two groups have identified the same two weaknesses of today's students exiting high school to either begin college or enter the workforce. We need to develop assessments that measure students' mastery of genuinely significant cognitive skills, such as their ability to write effectively and their ability to apply knowledge gained from content taught that allow them to analyze issues and problems in today's society and to effectively solve problems and communicate the findings with their peers.