



Did You Know...?

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Testing: Myths and Realities

No Child Left Behind and IDEA 2004 (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) call for accountability in today's schools. Standardized testing is one measure of student outcomes. Results are reported to the public and used in the process of determining which schools are *in need of improvement*. The pressure is on schools, families and students. This fact sheet may help you understand more about testing.

Note: The information in this fact sheet is adapted from an article in Wright's Law entitled "Testing: Myths & Realities" excerpted from an longer article published by the U. S. Department of Education, Testing for Results: Helping Families, Schools and Communities Understand and Improve Student Achievement (2002)

Why Tests Are Necessary

Testing students is nothing new. Good teachers have always tried to measure how well their students are learning and used tests to recognize student achievement and uncover learning problems. Without measuring student achievement, the only criteria governing student grades and promotion would be behavior in class and attendance. Testing has only recently emerged as an issue because taxpayers are asking more and tougher questions about the performance of their schools and students and seeking more and better information about school and student performance. The results of teacher-designed exams and a wide assortment of "off the shelf" tests are helpful, but they shed little light on school performance and academic program impact.

How Students Learn: What Works, What Doesn't Work

A strong accountability system composed of annual testing keyed to rigorous academic standards and a challenging curriculum taught in the school provides the sort of information needed to determine what works, what doesn't, how well students are achieving, and what to do to help those who need help.

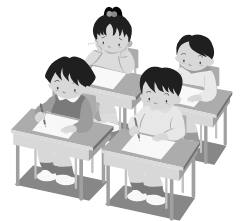
As the use of standardized tests increases and parents are better able to understand the dimensions of school and student performance, there will be greater pressure on low- performing schools to improve. This worries those who might feel that pressure and so they have attempted to undermine the accountability movement by challenging the usefulness of testing. The once common-sense assumption that testing is part of learning is being challenged by myths created to undermine the effort to improve America's schools.

9 Myths about Testing

Myth: Testing suppresses teaching and learning.

The Reality: A teacher is effective when a student learns. It is impossible to determine teaching effectiveness without determining learning results.

A teacher can present a great lesson, but if the students do not understand, then the lesson has no value. Testing students on what they are taught has always been a part of teaching. The process of testing students on what they are learning over a course of instruction is universally understood and appreciated. Testing helps teachers understand what their students need, helps students understand what they need to learn, and helps parents understand how they might help their children.



Myth: Testing narrows the curriculum by rewarding test-taking skills.

The Reality: Although a quality education reaches far beyond the confines of any specific test, annual testing is important. It establishes benchmarks of student knowledge. Tests keyed to rigorous state academic standards provide a measure of student knowledge and skills.

Myth: Testing promotes "teaching to the test."

The Reality: Testing is part of teaching and learning. Gifted and inspiring teachers use tests to motivate students as well as to assess to their learning. Effective teachers recognize the value of testing and know how to employ testing in instruction.

Myth: Testing does not measure what a student should know.

The Reality: In a strong accountability system, the curriculum is driven by academic standards, and annual tests are tied to the standards. With this in place, tests not only measure what a student should know but also provide a good indication of whether or not the student has learned the material covered by the curriculum.

Myth: Annual testing places too much emphasis on a single exam.

The Reality: Most Americans see the importance of visiting a physician for an annual checkup. They also recognize the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle and monitoring their health throughout the year. Annual testing provides important information on student achievement. Annual testing enables teachers and parents to know how best to improve student performance and diagnose problems that might be associated with poor performance. If a single annual test were the only device a teacher used to gauge student performance, it would indeed be inadequate. Effective teachers assess their students in various ways during the school year. As they do this, they monitor student achievement to help to ensure that their students will excel on annual tests.

Myth: Testing discriminates against different styles of test takers.



The Reality: A well-designed evaluation system accommodates unique needs. Evaluating the performance of all students is not easy. Some students do have trouble taking tests. Some students score poorly for reasons outside the classroom. A good evaluation system will reflect the diversity of student learning and achievement.

Myth: Testing provides little helpful information and accomplishes nothing.

The Reality: A good evaluation system provides invaluable information that can help diagnose achievement problems. Testing gives information that is necessary for teachers and parents to make informed decisions about instruction and curriculum in the classroom, school, district, and home. Testing insures the same high standards are taught in each classroom and school. Testing gives useful information and changes the way schools operate.

Myth: Testing hurts the poor, people of color and those with disabilities.

The Reality: Millions of young people—many from low-income families, many people of color and those with disabilities - are being left behind every day because of low expectations about their academic achievement and inadequate measures to determine academic achievement. These are the students who stand to benefit the most from annual testing. A strong accountability system will make it impossible to ignore achievement gaps where they exist. Moreover, where testing systems are now in place, low-income and minority students are indeed excelling. *Not only are these students excelling, but using the same good teaching techniques has helped all students do better in school.*

Myth: Testing will increase dropout rates and create physical and emotional illness in children.

The Reality: The overwhelming majority of students who drop out of school do so because they are frustrated. They cannot read or write or learn. Testing helps with the early identification of students who are having trouble learning so they may get the services they need to succeed. Testing, in any form, does sometimes cause anxiety. Effective teachers understand this and help students prepare for it. Testing is a part of life, and young people need to be equipped to deal with it.

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