Standardized Testing Has Gone Too Far

When many students hear the words “standardized testing” they start to cringe with dread. When it gets close to time to take the ISTEP+, ECA, SAT, ACT, IREAD, Acuity, AP exams, or any other standardized tests, stress levels start to creep up. Students take too many standardized tests throughout their education. Throughout my education I have taken the ISTEP+ every year from 3rd-8th grade, Lexile reading tests, ECAs for Biology, Algebra, and English, SAT, ACT, and AP tests in English, Biology, Government, and Calculus. Just this year my sister, Sammie, has taken the ISTEP+, Acuity, and Lexile tests. Students now take more than that. This leads me to my thesis: the number of standardized tests that students have to take should be reduced.

Indiana students currently have to take many tests. Starting from third grade students have to take the ISTEP+ English/language arts and math portions twice a year, the written portion in March and the online multiple-choice portion in the beginning of May or the end of April. They continue taking these tests until the end of eighth grade. In fourth and sixth grade the students also take the science portion. In fifth and seventh
grade the students take the social studies portion (GreatSchools Staff). Students have to
take practice tests called “Acuity” three times a year (Hurt). “Third graders are tested a
lot,” retired South Bend elementary school teacher Nancy Philabaum says. Her third
graders were tested on their reading levels three times a week and they have to take the
ISTEP+ and the I-READ tests. The IREAD test is “the principal tool officials are using to
implement a statewide policy emphasizing the importance of developing reading skills in
the early grades.” If a third grader fails this test they can take it a second time after
“intense remediation,” but if they still fail they are held back and retake third grade, also
retaking the third grade ISTEP+ and taking the IREAD again (IREAD). Having a test this
huge and deciding for third graders is not okay and it probably puts a lot more stress on
them than is acceptable for third graders.

Having this many tests is not good for student stress levels. In the past month I
have taken 3 AP tests within a week and my stress levels were beyond what they usually
are, and my stress levels are usually pretty high. Luckily for us Indiana kids, standardized
testing doesn’t begin until third grade, unlike states like Texas or Florida where it begins
in first grade and is extremely high stakes. Even waiting until third grade to test is too
early, especially with how much more frequently kids, ages 7-17, are getting diagnosed
with anxiety or depression (Wilde). Testing anxiety is a real thing. It causes students to
not do as well on tests because they get so nervous. This is mostly when the tests are
meaningful to the student’s future or they are high-stakes (Tilley). The common
symptoms of “exam stress” include “disturbed sleep patterns, tiredness, worry, irregular eating habits, increased infections, and inability to concentrate.” Being stressed all of the time can also lead to brain damage, mainly with “memory capacity.” MRI scans have also indicated that “chronically stressful conditions correspond with selective atrophy in the human brain” (Edelstein). When talking with Joshua Simpson, a teacher at Penn-Harris-Madison schools, he said that they “tend to see an increase in behavioral issues leading up to and following state testing windows.” This follows what Edelstein states in his article about how “some educators have documented ‘acting out’ behaviors exhibited by stressed out students.”

Anyone who is familiar with the current situation with education in the United States and the emphasis on test scores can probably grasp what I’m talking about when I say “teaching to the test.” This is a major problem in our current system. So much emphasis is put on standardized test scores that teachers tend to only focus on things that will be on the test and won’t focus on things that aren’t on the tests. Focusing on only certain aspects make it seem like, to the students, that only those areas are important and other subjects aren’t as important. “Teaching to the test” also enforces the idea among students that getting a good grade is more important than actually learning. Students shouldn’t have to “feel that [they need] to cheat to get ahead” (Wilde).

“Teaching to the test” can almost be counted as cheating because it can result in “score inflation,” which happens when “narrow test preparation replaces more in-depth and
comprehensive instruction” (Fairtest). This practice develops a lack of effective teaching. When teachers are teaching to the test they have to focus on much more specific topics and testing strategies (Hurt). Of course there are teachers that try to incorporate the materials on the test and other materials to round out the student’s understanding of the subject (Simpson). This is what teachers should do. It is good to go over testing strategies just because so much emphasis is already put on testing. It isn’t just students that feel pressure about test scores, in a survey given to Indiana public school teachers by 13 WTHR, 81.2% of teachers surveyed said they felt pressure related to their students’ achievement on standardized tests. This pressure has a negative impact on the teacher’s ability to teach effectively and has a negative impact on the learning environment of the classroom (13 WTHR).

When teaching to the test, student’s learning abilities and learning styles are often forgotten. Because standardized testing is not very conducive to different learning styles, the scores do not accurately reflect student or teacher abilities. In case people don’t realize it, there are different types of intelligences and teachers need to recognize that. The different types of intelligence have been narrowed down to 8 different categories: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalist. There have been studies that show how different our brains are (Christensen). In the survey given to Indiana teachers 57.4% responded “Disagree” and 28.3% responded “Strongly Disagree” to the statement “Standardized
testing accurately measures student achievement” (13 WTHR). It was a very emphatic no from Simpson about whether or not the standardized tests accurately reflect student abilities. Students can also have many things go into why they may not get a good score because the test is just one day. They could be not feeling well, gotten in a disagreement with someone, gotten enough sleep, recent death, not eaten, or they could be distracted (Meador, Testing).

Many teachers’ pay is based, or partially based, on their students’ test scores. Both Simpson and Hurt say their students’ test scores go into their pay as an aspect of their teacher evaluations. The state also gives schools grades based on the amount of growth that they may have shown for that year. If a school receives a failing grade for a couple years in a row, like a school in Gary or a couple of schools in Indianapolis, the state can take over running the school and try to improve the scores. This method of grading schools solely based on growth is not always accurate. At New Prairie, students who did not show much growth are put in remediation classes. This is not always fair. Last year at NPMS there was a group of students that got pulled from band because they did not show significant improvement on the ISTEP+. These students were placed in remediation courses instead of band. What did not go into consideration was that these students had received extremely high pass-plusses on the ISTEP+ the previous year and thus were not likely to show much improvement.
At the high school level, starting next year, AP teachers will get $100 for every student that passes an AP exam, for good teachers, that could be and extremely high bonus. Except students will also get paid $100 for each AP test they pass as well. The fact that we need to give students incentives to do well on tests does not bode well for learning for learning’s sake. Students should want to learn, not just do well on tests. Teachers should also try to make learning fun and all around educational.

Supporters of standardized testing say that the tests give everyone an equal chance to do well on them (“Is the Use...”). They really don’t. Standardized tests are not fair to students in American schools who don’t speak English as a first language and to kids who have disabilities. They also are not always very accurate. As I mentioned earlier, students may be brilliant and have a good grasp on the knowledge, but could be awful test takers. Also, since most standardized tests are multiple choice, there are students who are just lucky guessers.

Supporters also say that testing holds schools and teachers accountable and makes them responsible for teaching the students what they need to know for the test (Meador, Pros). Standardized testing is just one day and doesn’t always reflect the ability of the student taking the test. “Tests that measure as little and as poorly as multiple-choice exams cannot provide meaningful accountability.” The scores can’t factor in things like “score inflation” either (Fairtest). Score inflation is what comes from teaching to the test.
The supporters could also say that there are no other ways to measure student achievement. There actually are. They are just a little bit more expensive and “Americans don’t see the value in investing in education,” Chrystal Wilkeson said. Also, there is the possibility of testing students a lot less. That would put less pressure on them all of the time.

Supporters also say that the standards established by the test are consistent so that if a student moves around he or she is not ahead or behind and so that a third and sixth grade teacher aren’t teaching the same content (Meador, Pros). You will still get some overlap. A sixth grader is more likely to understand that content and more than likely will not remember everything about that content that is overlapped. I have personally gone over states and capitals and other things in history way more than once or twice while being in school. Also, with the standards not being consistent around all of the states, moving around isn’t going to change much. Some school systems require classes at different levels so either way someone is bound to be ahead or behind at some point.

“Physicians, lawyers, real-estate brokers and pilots all take high-stakes standardized tests to ensure they have the necessary knowledge for their professions” (Is the Use...). Just because standardized testing is widely used doesn’t make it right. Also, those are much smaller groups of people compared to an entire state or entire nation of kids taking the exact same test.
The cost of standardized testing is too high to not do anything about it. Save our students’ brains, lives, and educations along with our condemned schools and our teachers and reduce standardized testing in the state of Indiana. Keep the passion for learning alive in the students of Indiana.
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