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Nicole Intschert

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The Downside of Standardized Testing

Abstract

Children in the United States are tested “to an extent that is unprecedented in our history and unparalleled anywhere else in the world.” The federal No Child Left behind Act has triggered a standardized testing “explosion,” the repercussions of which have been felt throughout the nation. Standardized tests are those where “all students answer the same questions under similar conditions and their responses are scored in the same way, and may include multiple-choice or open-ended (constructed) responses.” These tests become “high-stakes” when the test results are used to determine significant decisions about student education, such as passing a grade level or graduating. Standardized test results in the U.S. are also being used to measure the performances of teachers, schools, and school districts.

Keywords

Buffalo, Education, K-12 Education, Policy Brief, PPG, PDF

The Downside of Standardized Testing

Nicole Intschert
SUNY Buffalo Law Student

Children in the United States are tested “to an extent that is unprecedented in our history and unparalleled anywhere else in the world.”¹ The federal No Child Left Behind Act has triggered a standardized testing “explosion,”² the repercussions of which have been felt throughout the nation.

Standardized tests are those where “all students answer the same questions under similar conditions and their responses are scored in the same way, and may include multiple-choice or open-ended (constructed) responses.”³ These tests become “high-stakes” when the test results are used to determine significant decisions about student education, such as passing a grade level or graduating.⁴ Standardized test results in the U.S. are also being used to measure the performances of teachers, schools, and school districts.



Unfortunately, inner-city schools populated by low-income students exhibit disproportionately low performance when measured against other schools and districts. Poor performance can lead in some cases to more resources, but in others to teacher reassignments, school closings, and other drastic consequences. Most importantly, the low-income students themselves suffer from many damaging effects from standardized testing and the high stakes placed on their results.

Buffalo public schools have not been exempt from this testing explosion. While we need ways to measure and track school and student performance, a one-size-fits-all approach of frequent and high-stakes standardized testing leads to narrowed curriculum content, prevents students from being actively engaged in the learning process, and sometimes undeservedly labels schools and students as failing.

What Standardized Tests are used in Buffalo and Why?

Currently, the standardized tests used in Buffalo public schools are dictated by federal, state, and district level mandates. The federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) mandates certain tests, which are implemented at the state level through the New York State Department of Education (DOE). The DOE and New York State Board of Regents require additional tests beyond those required by the

NCLB. Last, but not least, the Buffalo School District imposes additional tests, which include “benchmark” tests for younger students that are administered throughout the year, to help prepare students for the state exams and gauge student performance. Charts 1A and 1B indicate the tests required at each grade level, and Chart 2 indicates which level of administration requires the exams.

<u>Chart 1A (Grades K-8)⁵</u>				
	<u>English</u>	<u>Math</u>	<u>Science</u>	<u>Social Studies</u>
K	x (DIBELS)	x (mClass)		
1st	x (DIBELS)	x (mClass)		
2nd	x (DIBELS)	x (mClass)		
3rd	x (ELA & DIBELS)	x (NYS & mClass)		
4th	x (ELA)	X	x	
5th	x (ELA)	X		x
6th	x (ELA)	X		
7th	x (ELA)	X		
8th	x (ELA)	X	x	x

DIBELS = Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills

ELA = English Language Arts

<u>Chart 1B (Grades 9-12)⁶</u>		
	<u>Regents Diploma</u>	<u>Advanced Regents Diploma</u>
English Language Arts (Comprehensive English)	1	1
Global History & Geography	1	1
US History & Government	1	1
Mathematics	1	2 or 3
Science	1	2
Language Other Than English (LOTE)	1 (some exceptions available)	1
Total for Diploma:	5	7-9 (depending on math program followed)

Chart 2			
	Federal No Child Left Behind Act	NYS	Buffalo School District
DIBELS			x ⁷
mClass			x ⁸
ELA (3-8)	x	x	
Math (3-8)	x	x	
Science (4, 8)		x	
Social Studies (5, 8)		x	
Regents: ELA	x	x	
Regents: Social Studies		x	
Regents: Math	x	x	
Regents: Science		x	
Regents: LOTE		x	

As shown in these charts, many tests are administered at each grade level, even for extremely young students. The third grade classes are bombarded with exams, with four sets of tests. As one Buffalo charter school teacher explained, there are more tests given than those which count toward official school performance reports:

[A]t my grade level (7 and 8 ...), the students take an ELA state exam, a Math state exam, and a Science state exam. ... [W]e give 3 benchmark exams throughout the year that are modeled after the state exams in both ELA and math. The [students] also receive a practice test in Math and ELA the month before the state exams, for a total of 8 exams taken throughout the school year before the state exam. By the end of the year, they will have taken 3 state exams, and 8 exams modeled after the state exams.⁹

While the exact number of tests administered varies from school to school, students at lower performing schools are consistently tested more often than other students in an effort to improve their standardized test taking abilities.

What is the amount of time devoted to preparing for, taking, grading, and analyzing these tests?

Given the importance and weight of each exam, teachers are forced to spend all year preparing for tests: as one teacher explains, “We have a countdown in the office so we never forget how many instructional days we have left to teach [the students] what they need to know.”¹⁰ Most teachers devote the last month or month and a half nearly exclusively to test prep. Just as the amount of testing varies by school, test prep varies as well (A more well-off school like City Honors probably has less “test prep” and more general education offered than a school like PS 45, which is composed mainly of low-income refugee children.).¹¹



Throughout the year, up to two weeks of class time is interrupted for simulated testing.¹² Benchmark tests can be even more pervasive, as testing ranges from once every ten weeks to weekly assessment. On top of giving these various tests, teachers are pulled from their regular classrooms to attend professional development and meetings related to testing. At some schools, a teacher can expect to be pulled at least once or twice per month for a meeting regarding exam preparation. Then, of course, the actual exams must be administered (either in January, June or August).

Once the tests have been administered, teachers have to find time to grade them. While there are often “Superintendent’s Conference Days” that are partially used for scoring throughout the academic year, teachers from each building are required to go to a designated scoring location and spend 1-3 additional days scoring tests.



Once all the grading is done, someone has to analyze what the scores mean. Some schools have “content area teams,” which have 4 hours of common planning time each week during the school year, during which approximately 1 of the 4 hours is used to analyze the data from these exams. Individual teachers may have little to no formal role in analyzing test data, though, as there are central accountability offices which help principals understand their schools’ data and how they pertain to State accountability standards. Regardless, teachers are given the data at the beginning of the school year and have to do their own analysis of it in order to adjust their teaching as necessary for the next year.

How does this system detract from students’ education experience?

Standardized tests are limited in what they can accomplish. “As noted by education scholar Roger Wallenstein, “No standardized test measures ... feeling in a classroom, or student attitudes, or the effect that the school has on its students and families.”¹³ Unfortunately, due to the enormous pressure on

teachers and schools to boost students' test performance, teachers get caught in the trap of "teaching to the test."¹⁴ Test subjects dictate the curriculum, pushing out many other important subject areas such as art, physical education, and science. Writing research papers and conducting lab experiments are specific types of skills that are necessary for success in higher education but may not fit into the curriculum requirements set by standardized tests.¹⁵ Instruction is focused on "rote memorization," with a distinct lack of hands-on learning and critical thinking, resulting in students becoming test takers rather than thinkers and creators.¹⁶ This system of teaching and testing stifles creativity, and rewards quick answers to superficial questions.¹⁷

In some cases, forcing teachers to teach to the test requires a pace of instruction that far exceeds the skills and abilities of some of the students. Teaching to the test can also mean that students fail to develop real life skills that will transfer to other areas of their lives. Students are denied "their fundamental intellectual freedom"¹⁸ in this kind of environment, and "[w]hen these students are asked to memorize for the sake of a test, rather than to learn skills to help them be successful, we're sending them off into the world without the necessary preparation."¹⁹

How does standardized testing affect children in poverty?

Many impoverished students are disadvantaged when it comes to taking standardized tests to begin with. "Noncognitive factors" such as fatigue or attention can play a large role²⁰. Impoverished students in the City of Buffalo often suffer from poor nutrition, lead poisoning or other toxic exposures, high-stress home lives, and other negative factors. These factors are compounded with a less developed vocabulary and a lack of background knowledge or "cultural capital"²¹ to draw on (e.g., many poor, inner-city students may have no idea what camping is). Ironically, the focus on high stakes testing leads to cuts in arts, music, and other activities that help develop that cultural capital.²²



Once a student has taken the test, he or she gets labeled: Level 1 (failing), Level 2 (failing), Level 3 (passing) and Level 4 (mastery). According to one Buffalo Public School teacher, "Most students start the year off at a Level 2 in our school, and struggle to reach passing. Last year we did not tell students their levels, but this year it's like sensitivity was thrown out the window -- we tell our students 'You are a Level 2, you are a level 3.'²³ These labels can have a great impact on students.



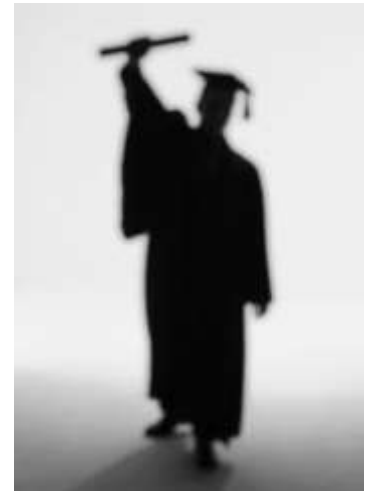
This kind of environment leads to “increased grade retention and dropping out,” and the students “suffer a loss of interest in school and self-esteem.”²⁴ Failure becomes the norm, and frustration is a constant. Further, the “narrow focus of standardized testing and the high stakes that are attached to it create ‘perverse incentives for pushing low-performing students out of school’ through zero tolerance and school-based arrests,”²⁵ and “increases cheating and other efforts to boost scores without improving educational quality. This can be done by arranging for low-scoring students to be absent on test days.”²⁶ NCLB funds are sometimes used to hire school police, and the Act even encourages schools to refer students to law enforcement for misbehavior at school.²⁷ Schools become hostile environments for these students, as the schools both bore and alienate them, and many students end up in the juvenile and criminal justice systems, flooding the “school-to-prison pipeline.”²⁸

Some say that standardized testing pushes poor minority youth into “their respective places in a labor force, stratified by class, race, and gender” by reinforcing “insecurity, disillusionment, and, ultimately, the disengagement of the dispossessed” and “educating youth for marginalization, low-wage jobs with little occupational mobility, and incarceration.”²⁹ Whether this sentiment is true or peppered with hyperbole, it is the case that over-testing does not improve college or employment readiness,³⁰ but in fact does the opposite.³¹

Thus, it is little wonder that some students “turn away from mainstream aspirations and embrace the ‘street’ identity that is embodied in the culture of many low-income communities where youth take control of their destiny the only way they know how--by seeking acceptance and a sense of competence that is sorely lacking in their educational experience.”³² A Buffalo Public School ESL teacher with over ten years of experience comments on this frustrating shift in attitudes:

When I first started teaching, students could earn a local high school diploma. This was advantageous for many students who were unable to meet the high level Regents requirements. They had options. Now there are no options. Every student has to earn a Regents diploma. Every student has to pass the standardized state tests to graduate. I have watched so many students who are unbelievably talented in so many nonacademic ways fall through the cracks because they couldn’t write an essay comparing two pieces of literature that they will never read again... We are letting a great deal of really talented kids fail because they are not college-bound material.³³

Clearly, a return to a more comprehensive, flexible educational model ought to be our policy-makers' goal. Other educational tools, models, and goals are available, and it is time to explore these options. Buffalo public school students, including low-income students, deserve a comprehensive, well-rounded educational experience that truly captures their potential for learning and critical thinking.



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237 Main St., Suite 1200, Buffalo NY 14203