

## Standardized testing is eroding the foundation of parental support and engagement essential to student success.

*In the past decade, federal and state education initiatives such as the Common Core and No Child Left Behind have been put into place with the aim of improving students' academic performance. In new research, [Jesse H. Rhodes](#) examines the impact of the standardized testing that comes along with these reforms. He finds that these tests erode parents' confidence in government and reduces their involvement in their children's schools. He argues that by taking parents' influence away, standardized testing reforms have alienated them from their children's schools – and from government in general – thus discouraging them from engaging in education.*



Standardized testing has become a rite of passage for students in American elementary and secondary schools. Unfortunately, as my research shows, these assessments frustrate and alienate parents, discouraging them from participating in their children's education. Ironically, the education reforms designed to spark school improvements may be undermining the [very conditions necessary to student success](#).

Standardized testing has a long history in education policy in the United States, but its use has exploded in recent decades. Since the 1980s, policymakers have worried that the relatively modest academic performance of American students – especially in comparison with that of young people in other advanced industrialized nations – threatens the United States' long-term economic competitiveness. These fears have stimulated the federal government and the states to [implement an increasingly far-reaching set of reforms](#) intended to boost students' academic achievement.

Foremost among these reforms are standardized tests intended to measure students' progress toward academic goals and – in cases where achievement is lagging – hold schools accountable for performance. Over time, these assessment systems have grown to involve a greater range of subjects and cover a larger proportion of grade levels. Additionally, they have been tied to a broader range of performance-based rewards and sanctions for schools.

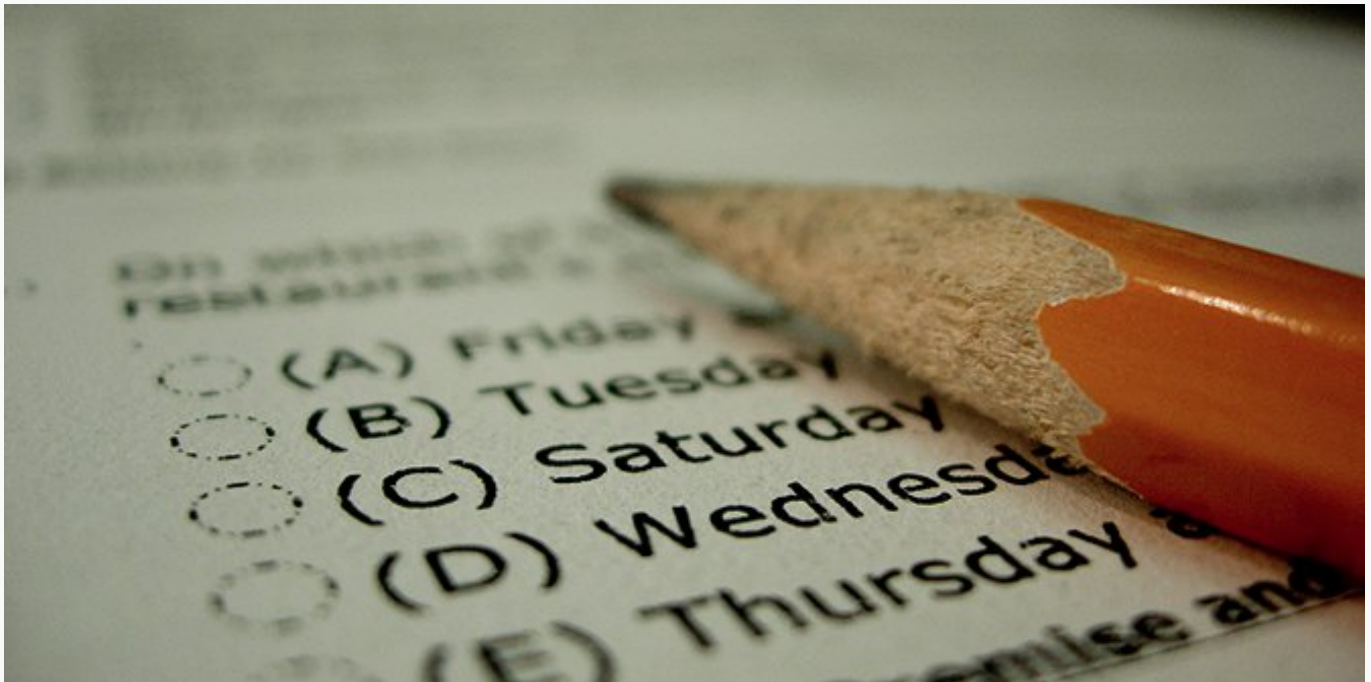
Most famously, the federal [No Child Left Behind Act of 2002](#) put in place an escalating series of sanctions against schools if their students did not make “adequate yearly progress” toward the goal of 100 percent proficiency in reading and mathematics as measured by standardized exams. Recent state-led education reforms – notably, the [Common Core State Standards Initiative](#) – have reinforced this approach.

Researchers have vigorously debated whether these reforms stimulate improvements in students' academic achievement (see, e.g. [here](#) and [here](#)). Virtually ignored in this debate is how standardized testing affects other stakeholders in education – and, in particular, how it affects parents' attitudes toward government and their involvement in their children's education. This oversight is remarkable, as it is widely known that parental engagement is a key to student success.

In my research – the first study of its kind – I examined how parents' exposure to standardized testing regimes affected their attitudes about government and participation in their children's education. To do this, I coupled a unique survey of parents of public school students with information about the scope and content of the standardized testing policies within their state of residence (despite intense nationwide focus on improving education, the details of standardized testing policies vary considerably from state to state). My survey controlled for a wide range of individual- and state-level factors, and used sophisticated matching methods to make effective comparisons of parents across states.

My research provided compelling evidence that parents residing in states with more extensive standardized testing policies – that is, policies covering a wider array of subjects and grade-levels, and involving a higher level

of technical complexity – were more alienated from their children’s education, even taking many other factors into consideration. They expressed more negative attitudes about their children’s schools, were less trusting of government in general, and were more skeptical of the efficacy of government to address social problems.



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The effect of these policies is large. For example, parents residing in states with the most highly-developed testing policies expressed levels of trust in government 11 percentage points lower than those living in states with less-developed testing regimes. Strikingly, these effects rivaled the influence of individual-level variables like age, party identification, and church attendance, suggesting that testing policies play a crucial role in shaping parents’ attitudes.

Even more worryingly, parents residing in states with the most elaborate testing regimes were less likely to engage in some forms of participation in their children’s education – especially contacting teachers, attending open houses, and participating in voluntary activities like school fundraisers. Again, the effect of these policies is large: for example, parents in states with the most extensive standardized testing policies were 17 percentage points less likely to contact their children’s schools, and 28 percentage points less likely to participate in school fundraisers, than were parents in states with less-developed testing policies.

What explains these findings? I argue that the politics surrounding enactment and implementation of standardized testing reforms have alienated parents from their children’s schools – and from government in general – thus discouraging them from engaging in education. While parents are key stakeholders in education, they have not been given a major say in the design and implementation of standardized testing reforms. Rather, federal, state, and local policymakers, along with myriad special interest groups, have [made the most important decisions](#).

Furthermore, because standardized tests have huge stakes for schools, they have encouraged all kinds of undesirable behaviors from school personnel – from teaching to the test to [downplaying non-tested subjects](#) to [outright cheating](#) – that erode the quality of education. Small wonder, then, that parents in states with extensive testing regimes feel [disempowered](#).

My results point to the disturbing conclusion that standardized testing policies – despite their well-meaning intent – may be eroding the foundation of parental support and engagement essential to student success. If we want to improve education, we need to start by engaging the interests, values, and beliefs of the people who, at the end of the day, determine whether schools will succeed or fail – the parents of school children. Policymakers, school administrators, and teachers need to do more to educate parents about how and why school reforms work the way they do. But the education of parents is merely the beginning: parents need to play a major role in discussions

about the design and implementation of education reforms. Empowering parents is essential if comprehensive school reforms are to succeed.

*This article is based on the paper 'Learning Citizenship? How State Education Reforms Affect Parents' Political Attitudes and Behavior' in Political Behavior.*

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Jesse H. Rhodes is associate professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He is the author of *An Education in Politics: The Origins and Evolution of No Child Left Behind*, published by Cornell University Press; as well as of articles published in *Political Behavior*, *Perspectives on Politics*, *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, *Publius: The Journal of Federalism*, and other journals. Rhodes' research interests include education politics, civil rights and voting rights, the American presidency, and political parties.



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