**Thomas B. Fordham Institute**

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**The Four Biggest Myths of the Anti-Testing Backlash**

Across the United States and beyond, the anti-testing movement seems to be reaching its crescendo. Yet the case against testing is remarkably weak, resting on a foundation of four fundamental misunderstandings of the role that assessments play in our schools.

Myth #1: Teachers’ instincts should guide instruction

Perhaps the most common anti-testing refrain is that we should get out of the way and just “[**let teachers teach**](http://voices.washingtonpost.com/answer-sheet/teachers/how-to-save-schools-let-teache.html).” The idea is that teachers know best and that standardized testing—or any kind of testing, really, other than the teacher-built kind—is a distracting nuisance that saps valuable instructional time, deflects instructors from what’s most essential, and yields very little useful information about student learning.

What you don’t often hear is how research has consistently demonstrated that, absent independent checks, many teachers hold low-income and minority students to different standards than their affluent, white peers. This bias is rarely intentional, but it has been found [**time and time again**](http://www.edexcellence.net/commentary/education-gadfly-daily/common-core-watch/2012/how-assessments-can-help-us-overcome-the-soft-bigotry-of-low-expectations.html).

Standardized tests not only help us unearth these biases but also put the spotlight on achievement gaps that need to be closed, students who need extra help, schools that are struggling, and on. And by doing so, they drive critical conversations about the curriculum, pedagogy, and state and district policies that we need to catch kids up and get them back on the path to success.

Myth #2: Testing is responsible for “drill-and-kill” instruction

As anyone who went through public schools before 1990 can attest, the days of ditto-driven instruction are not unique to the testing era. Too many testing foes hearken back to the pre-accountability days, imagining a Lake Wobegone era where all teachers were above average and all instruction was great. But the truth is that “drill-and-kill” was as popular in the era of mimeograph machines as today; it’s a function of low teacher capacity, failed leadership, or excessive within-class achievement variability, not overzealous accountability.

What’s more, plenty of research suggests that, if teachers really want to improve student performance on standardized tests, they would be wise to embrace engaging pedagogy and intellectually challenging content rather than test prep. All else being equal, the students who typically fare better on state tests are those whose teachers focus not on empty test-taking tricks but rather on content-rich and intellectually engaging curriculum. Ironically, a position paper focused on **“debunking” standardized tests** that was released by the Chicago Teachers Union this week showed that students whose teachers focused more on test prep than on content scored *lower*on the ACT test than did their peers. These findings echo the results of a [**2001 study**](http://ccsr.uchicago.edu/publications/authentic-intellectual-work-and-standardized-tests-conflict-or-coexistence) from the University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research. Regardless of socioeconomic background, “students who received assignments requiring more challenging intellectual work” achieved greater gains on standardized tests.

Myth #3: Tests can’t measure what really matters

In education, standardized tests have come to be seen only for what they *can’t* do, not for what they can. A familiar complaint is that they fail to measure “[**what really matters**](http://www.edexcellence.net/commentary/education-gadfly-daily/flypaper/2012/the-test-score-hypothesis.html)” in education—the kind of critical thinking that students need to succeed and the social and emotional skills that great teachers reinforce every day. Of course, no test can measure everything that’s worth teaching and learning. But to suggest that tests should be abandoned because they are necessarily limited is shortsighted. There is real content that students need to master; there *are* questions that have right and wrong answers; and there are many skills that can be evaluated using well-crafted standardized tests, including even the multiple-choice kind. To be sure, teaching is a craft, which means, like all professions, it requires both art and science; the science of teaching benefits greatly from the information collected through well-crafted tests.

Myth #4: “Standardization” doesn’t work

Another all-too-common refrain from the anti-testers is perhaps the most sweeping: the suggestion that “standardization”—i.e., the process of setting standards; developing large-scale, aligned assessments; and holding schools and districts accountable to them—is a fool’s errand.

Many point to the now-famous Finnish success story as “evidence” that the best education systems in the world are those that give teachers broad autonomy, don’t use standardized tests, and have devolved accountability to the local level. In fact, Pasi Sahlberg, author of [***Finnish Lessons***](http://www.edexcellence.net/commentary/education-gadfly-weekly/2012/april-5/finnish-lessons-what-can-the-world-learn-from-finland.html)*,*has argued,

*The main lesson from Finland is that there is another way to transform current education systems than that based on standardization, testing, accountability and competition…*

But that telling of the Finnish story skips some of the most [**relevant facts**](http://www.edexcellence.net/commentary/education-gadfly-daily/flypaper/2012/real-lessons-from-finland-hard-choices-rigorously-implemented.html). Yes, Finnish schools and teachers today enjoy broad autonomy. But that autonomy came after nearly three decades of tight central control and standardization. In Finland, that standardization took the form of a centrally developed, tightly scripted, *mandatory* national curriculum that was forced on all schools (including private schools that were part of the nation’s “comprehensive school reform”). As the national curriculum was rolled out, a state inspectorate worked to ensure effective and systematic implementation. And over the course of several decades, the entire teacher workforce was retrained so that they had the content expertise needed before the state began slowing loosening its control a little more than twenty years ago.

Our own history suggests that it is exactly the states that have set rigorous standards connected to strong accountability regimes—most notably, Massachusetts—that have seen the greatest gains for all students, not just our most disadvantaged. Tests deserve not to be derided but [**celebrated**](http://www.edexcellence.net/commentary/education-gadfly-daily/common-core-watch/2010/like-the-tide-great-standards-lift-all-boats.html) for the crucial role they are playing in our schools. They are not the only answer to what ails American education, but it’s hard to think of a meaningful reform effort that doesn’t require the effective measurement of student achievement that tests make possible.

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