

Is The Big Standardised Test A Big Standardised Flop?

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Education

I look at K-12 policies and practices from the classroom perspective.



This may not be the key to a better tomorrow. (Getty Royalty Free)

Since No Child Left Behind first rumbled onto the scene, the use of a Big Standardized Test to drive accountability and measure success has been a fundamental piece of education reform. But recently, some education reform stalwarts are beginning to express doubts.

There are plenty of reasons to doubt the validity of the Big Standardized Test, be it PARCC or SBA or whatever your state is using these days. After almost two decades of its use, we've raised an entire generation of students around the notion of test-based accountability, and yet the fruits of that seem.... well, elusive. Where are the waves of students now arriving on college campuses super-prepared? Where are the businesses proclaiming that today's grads are the most awesome in history? Where is the increase in citizens with great-paying jobs? Where are any visible signs that the test-based accountability system has worked?

Two years ago Jay Greene (no relation), head of the Department of Education Reform at the University of Arkansas, [was writing about the disconnect in test scores](#)-- if test scores were going up, wasn't that supposed to improve "life outcomes." Wasn't the whole argument that getting students to raise test scores would be indicative of better prospects in life? After all, part of the argument behind education reform has been that a better education was the key to a better economic future, both for individuals and for the country. Greene looked at the

research and concluded that there was no evidence of a link between a better test score and a better life.

Here on Forbes.com this week, contributor Frederick Hess (director of education policy studies at the American Enterprise Institute, a right-tilted thinky tank) [expressed some doubts as well](#). AEI has always supported the ed reform cause, but Hess has often shown a willingness to follow where the evidence leads, even if that means challenging reform orthodoxy. He cites yet another study that shows a disconnect between a student's test scores and her future. In fact, the research shows that programs that improve "attainment" don't raise test scores, and programs that raise test scores don't affect "attainment."

Test scores can be raised with several techniques, and most of those techniques have nothing to do with providing students with a better education. Drill the test prep. Take at-risk students out of electives and make them take test-related courses instead. And have teachers learn, over the years, how to teach more directly to the test. But do you want higher test scores or better education? Because those are two unrelated things.

The end result is that the test scores do not tell you what they claim they tell you. They are less like actionable data and more like really expensive noise.

Hess and Greene represent a small but growing portion of the reform community; for most, the Big Standardized Test data is God. For others, the revenue stream generated by the tests, the pre-tests, the test prep materials, and the huge mountains of data being mined-- those will be nearly impossible to walk away from.

But there is one critical lesson that ed reform testing apostates should keep in mind. The idea that the Big Standardized Test does not measure what it claims to measure, the idea that it actually does damage to schools, the idea that it simply isn't what it claims to be-- while these ideas are presented as new notions for ed reformers, classroom teachers have been raising these concerns for about 20 years.

Teachers have said, repeatedly, that the tests don't measure what they claim to measure, and that the educational process in schools is being narrowed and weakened in order to focus on testing. Teachers have said, repeatedly, that the Big Standardized Tests are a waste of time and money and not helping students get an education. Teachers have been saying it over and over and over again. In return teachers have been told, "You are just afraid of accountability" and "These tests will finally keep you honest."

After 20 years, folks are starting to figure out that teachers were actually correct. The Big Standardized Test is not helping, not working, and not measuring what it claims to measure. Teachers should probably not hold their collective breath waiting for an apology, though it is the generation of students subjected to test-centered schooling that deserve an apology. In the meantime, if ed reform thought leader policy wonk mavens learn one thing, let it be this-- the next time you propose an Awesome idea for fixing schools and a whole bunch of professional educators tell you why your idea is not great, listen to them.