CTU Position Paper: Debunking the Myths of Standardized Testing
Picture the school you would like all children to attend. Do you envision a place where curiosity is piqued, creativity is developed, problems are debated and solved and multiple perspectives are respected? What about daily drilling for standardized tests, exposure only to subjects that are tested (that leaves out social studies, art, music, library, and physical education), reading passages instead of books, and math and science procedures but not unifying concepts?

In the last twenty years, the U.S. has made a dramatic shift toward a reliance on standardized test scores as a measure of teaching effectiveness and school improvement. The “accountability movement” began in the 1970’s but spread rapidly in the 1990s and became consolidated into law by No Child Left Behind in 2002. Led, not by educators, but by the business sector, the major players in education “reform” legislation were members of the Business Coalition for Education Reform, the Business Roundtable, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, and many state chambers of commerce.

Prior to the accountability era, the educational reforms with the most momentum were influenced by the Civil Rights Movement. Desegregation, affirmative action, and programs like Head Start challenged the inequities of American society. Scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show that the achievement gap shrank through the 1970s and 1980s. Teenaged Black students through the late 1970s and 1980s, the first cohort to accrue the benefits of the social reforms of the Civil Rights Era, experienced the most significant growth during that time.¹

The era of accountability through the last two federal education policies, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and now Race to the Top, has greatly inflated standardized test-taking and “test-prep” curricula without evidence connecting it to real learning. Standardized testing grew out of the American tradition of using quantitative attempts to measure ‘intelligence’ as a pretext for racist and exclusionary policies.² Today’s tests still discriminate and together with inequities in housing, employment, education, and health care, contributes to the “achievement gap”. Overreliance on standardized-tests has led to reduced graduation rates among students of color, narrowed the curriculum in all subjects and grade levels and ill-prepared our students for fulfilling careers and civic engagement. The reforms of the accountability era are harmful policies that lead to neither short-term successes nor long-term prosperity for students.

Politicians have become increasingly “outraged” at the number of low-income children, and students of color who are not academically prepared to attend college. Instead of looking at some of the many serious issues these students face on a daily basis, or looking to decrease societal inequities or instituting research-based strategies for school improvement (such as smaller classes), the corporate-led “reform” movement is blaming the teachers. This “business model” approach to education is data obsessed and purports that the solution to inequities in education is to fire teachers whose students have low test scores and reward teachers whose students have high test scores. They continue to promote top down approaches to quick fixes, ignoring decades of research. The way to achieve sustainable improvement is through long-term processes such as developing teaching quality, empowering community and families, mandating smaller class sizes, improving resource access for schools and communities in need, and implementing a joyous, critical, inquiry-based and creative learning experience for students.
High stakes testing & the achievement gap

Corporate reform groups such as Advance Illinois and Stand for Children claim teachers are the main factor in student academic achievement. Recent research shows otherwise: as much as 90% of variation in student growth is explained by factors outside the control of teachers\(^3,4\). Children who do not have access to health care, who are hungry, who are exhausted from night-time symptoms of asthma, who are fearful of violence in their communities, who do not have books or access to other informal learning at home, whose parents have limited education, whose families are constantly stressed by economic problems, and who do not go to libraries and museums in their free time are at an academic disadvantage.

These factors are highly related not only to testing outcomes, academic achievement, future education and socio-economic success, but also to the racial, ethnic and class origins of individuals. The inequitable history of American society, politics, institutions and economic relations are at the root of these relations. As a result, when academic outcomes are averaged across subgroups such as race and class, glaring gaps appear.

Corporate reformers use the academic achievement gap to justify increasing the frequency and consequences of high-stakes testing. These policies have nothing to do with addressing the root causes of how such gaps arise and persist in society, nor do they improve student learning. In fact these policies typically worsen academic outcomes for students impacted by them.

According to the National Center for Fair and Open Testing, Black and Latino students, especially those from low-income families, have suffered enormously from the nation’s increase in high-stakes testing and the inordinate amount of time spent on test prep.\(^6\) The tests have resulted in an increase in drop-out rates for these populations,\(^7\) an increase in expulsion and “counseling out” of schools seeking to increase their test scores, an increase in grade retention,\(^8\) cheating by principals, an increase in special education placement, limited course content and a decrease in access to merit-based scholarships and thus a bigger economic barrier to attending college. It has also been shown that earning a low performance label attached to low standardized test results can discourage urban low-income students from enrolling in college.\(^9\)

“Many public officials, along with like-minded journalists and other observers, are apt to minimize the matter of resources and assume that everything deficient about education for poor and minority children can be remedied by more forceful demands that we ‘raise the bar.’ The implication here would seem to be that teachers and students could be doing a better job but have, for some reason, chosen not to do so and need only be bribed or threatened into improvement...The focus among policy has been on standards of outcomes rather than standards of opportunity,”

Alfie Kohn\(^5\)
High-stakes tests, even when aligned to standards, cannot adequately measure knowledge

Test scores fail as measures of learning when high-stakes testing dominates curricula and instructional practice. When practices driven by testing are widespread, test score gains do not represent a corresponding growth in the broader domain of knowledge that tests are supposed to sample and measure. With extensive use of coaching, test scores may not even reflect true gains in the narrow subject matter of the particular test.\textsuperscript{10,11}

“...all of the testing has taken away from teaching content knowledge to the children, for various subjects, which forces teachers to teach to the test and skim the surface of the subjects,”

~CPS 3\textsuperscript{rd} grade teacher.

QUICK FACTS:

- Since NCLB the testing industry has experienced double-digit growth. In 2008 K-12 testing was a $2.6 billion industry.\textsuperscript{12}

- Errors in standardized tests resulted in thousands of students flunking, not passing college entrance exams, and incorrect state rankings.\textsuperscript{13}

- CPS candidates in the National Board Certification program reported spending in some cases 10 full school days per year (48 hours) on standardized test preparation. (CTU, NBCT Candidates internal survey)

- 3 out of 5 community college students need at least one remedial course because they are ill prepared for college. Less than 25% of these students earn a degree within 8 years.\textsuperscript{14}

- Excessive reliance on standardized tests results and test prepping makes for a poor transition from K-12 to college.
High stakes testing takes up valuable instructional time, with negative impacts on student learning

“Results from the test are not always valid, because of the burn-out my students experience. Preparing for tests takes away from instructional time... my students develop testing anxiety. They often complain about the amount of testing and perform poorly,”

~ CPS Language Arts teacher, grades 6 – 8.

In a comprehensive survey, CPS teachers were found to have devoted large amounts of time to prepping students for the ACT; typically, over a month of instructional time was devoted to test-prep. The outcome? More test prep was associated with lower ACT scores.¹⁵

Research shows students who are tasked with intellectually demanding work that promotes disciplined inquiry and relevance to their lives score higher on standardized tests.¹⁶ CPS teachers have reported being forced into teaching their students testing strategies, at the expense of teaching content and processes to enable students to meet standards.

“Strategies like skimming for information, eliminating irrelevant answers, reading answers first then checking for content in the question. Students are not taught to think critically or deeply at this time. They are presented with so much information over a broad range of topics that is loaded into their short-term memory to be forgotten as soon as the standardized test is completed,” reported a CPS teacher of middle school environmental science, biology and pre-engineering.

The frequency of standardized testing, and the instructional time devoted to test prep, crowds out the use of authentic formative assessments that help teachers carefully advance student learning.¹⁷

Constant high-stakes testing causes students to interpret all their assessments as summative rather than as interactions meant to help their learning process, eroding the value of formative assessments to the teacher and student.¹⁸

“Ironically, test prep is not always the best preparation for taking tests. Children expand their vocabulary and improve their reading skills when they learn history, science, and literature, just as they may sharpen their mathematic skills while learning science and geography, and the arts may motivate students to love learning.”

~ Diane Ravitch¹⁹
Testing Scandals

Schools and districts across the country have been caught cheating (changing test answers or giving their students test problems ahead of time), including in Atlanta, Philadelphia, Washington D.C. and Texas. A March, 2011 USA Today investigation proved that the dramatic rise in Washington, D.C. test scores was due to cheating, not to Michelle Rhee’s “no excuses” administration. Statisticians have said that the probability that the number of erasures on tests from specific schools and specific grades could be due to anything but cheating is as likely as winning the lottery’s Power Ball. There have also been instances where tests were scored incorrectly, failing and sending students who had actually passed the tests to summer school.

In October 2010, the Chicago Tribune reported that when Illinois adjusted the ISAT scoring system in 2006, it “lowered the number of points required to pass” resulting in more students appearing as if they were “proficient” than before. A recent study by the Chicago Consortium on School Research found that, after correcting for the differences in assessments and changing demographics, there was essentially no increase in scores of elementary students over two decades of test-driven reform.

Some tests, such as in Mississippi, have such low thresholds for scoring high that despite ranking high on the percentage of students meeting state standards they were at the bottom based on the NAEP test results. There were 35 states that set the proficiency level on state tests in 2009 way below what would be considered ‘basic’ on the NAEP equivalent score.

Even without high-profile scandals such as those mentioned above, the use of test scores for accountability threatens the validity of test results. Daniel Koretz, a scholar in educational measurement, has been testifying about the effect of high-stakes testing on narrowing instruction and its harm to student learning for over two decades. Highly regarded national institutions and associations, such as the National Board on Educational Testing and Public Policy, the National Academy of Sciences, the American Educational Research Association, the Economic Policy Institute, The Association of Childhood Education International, and the Education Sector have been writing for decades about the pitfalls of both standardized testing in general and the over-reliance on standardized testing, especially in using these tests to make major high-stakes decisions such as high school graduation or teacher evaluation.

The policy makers have not listened. Even though the media reports on testing scandals, the editorial boards of the nation’s newspapers still support a system of “increased accountability” which they equate with test scores. This type of response is not new. When score inflation became apparent in the early 90’s in response to what were relatively low-stakes accountability the policymakers refused to acknowledge the problem.

The important lesson about these scandals is that standardized testing and accountability policies make test results useless for making valid inferences about real student learning and hurt students.

“The reaction in the policy world was quite uniform. It was not, ‘Oh, test accountability doesn’t work as well as we had hoped.’ It was, ‘Test-based accountability was the way to go; we were just using the wrong tests.’”

~ Daniel Koretz, Professor of Education,
Conclusion:

Why do corporate interests continue to push towards a test-centered public education system that is clearly harmful to students? The reality of their agenda is to align the outputs of public education with the needs of an unequal and highly polarized economic system. The soaring income inequality in recent decades that continues to benefit the upper class has been driven primarily by job polarization.⁵ There has been rapid growth in low-skilled low-wage work while middle-wage jobs are disappearing under global competition. Even jobs requiring post-secondary education are driven down into low-wage work.⁶ Within such an economic system, for the people who control the majority of wealth and the direction of public policy, large investment in educating the majority of working-class children does not make economic sense. As educator Lois Weiner has succinctly put it, global-scale Wal-Mart jobs require no more than an 8th grade education.⁷ The missteps of corporate education reformers are not due to their oversight of evidence but are simply cold calculation. If the standards and livelihoods they envision for our children are limited to “McJobs,” it seems they do not need the kinds of inter-disciplinary, authentic project-based learning and critical inquiry that are prevalent in the prestigious schools the privileged send their children to. Teachers and parents have much higher expectations and demands for the public education of all children.

Notes


4 These “effects” are calculated by statistical models that account for the multi-level nature of factors that influence student achievement. Students are nested within classrooms, which are themselves nested within schools and particular communities. Researchers attempt to isolate the effects of each level, while controlling for other factors that affect student achievement at each level using the quantitative measures that are available to them. However these measures are unable to fully account for the disadvantages faced by students. To get an overview of the inadequacy of these methods, see the CTU position paper on the CPS Value-Added Metric.


http://www.bc.edu/research/nbetpp/statements/M1N4.pdf
20 Gillum J., Bello, M. (2011, March 30). When standardized test scores soared in D.C., were the gains real? USA Today