



Real Impact: Student Opinions for a Change

An Education|Evolving initiative to connect today's students with the nation's education policy leaders

Students question standardized testing Sampling of articles that support using other learning measures

Standardized tests have become synonymous with the drive nationally to measure and compare school and student success. Experts are weighing-in on both sides of the controversy over whether and to what extent they should be used – especially to determine whether students graduate from high school. But, how do those most affected – students themselves – feel about standardized tests and their growing usage?

While most students accept the growing realities of taking high stakes standardized tests, some 'conscientious objectors' have emerged. This document summarizes their reasons, as reported in an admittedly unscientific sampling of newspaper articles from across the nation. Among the common threads in the articles:

1. Students acknowledge that states have good reason to measure achievement objectively. But students are disappointed in adults' lack of imagination about ways to do this effectively.
2. Since alternative assessments are available, students don't believe there is a need to use only standardized test outcomes to determine graduation.
3. Students perceive that the tests are of limited value since they can measure only narrow types of learning, via narrow methods (such as multiple choice questions and five paragraph essays which require regurgitation of facts); and since students can take tests multiple times – literally, until they pass.
4. Students view standardized tests as a waste of time. Test-taking distracts from the time they have for learning, and therefore disrespects the students' time. This goes for time spent preparing for the test, time spent taking the test, and the time taken away from their classes on testing days. Students from Chicago said they had taken over ten tests since they started high school (Tanzman).
5. Students believe that testing is affecting school culture, leaving less time for free thought or originality.
6. Students believe their test scores are given too much attention. It seems their whole lives can hinge on a score. Test scores are beside their names on rosters, causing teachers to make snap judgments of them (Tanzman). Students feel reduced to numbers (Tanzman). They must pass tests in order to graduate. "What do you think the kids are going to

do if they don't pass the test?" asked Timothy Butler of Rainier Beach High School in Washington (Shaw).

7. Students who actively oppose the tests say they're doing so because someone needs to take a stand. The adults in their schools aren't protesting; much less proposing alternatives.

Students Say 'Enough!'

Chicago high schoolers say they will no longer feed the test-talking frenzy.

by Will Tanzman and others

The following is the text of the letter from students at Whitney Young High School explaining why they deliberately failed the Illinois Goals Assessment Program tests. This letter was distributed at Whitney Young in February 1999 at the time of the tests.

To Whom It May Concern:

Some concerned students are weary of standardized tests and all of the baggage with which they come. Although tests are useful for giving some sort of "objective" account of some types of achievement, enough is enough. This year, the junior class has wasted a significant amount of class time preparing for and taking three different standardized tests. Since we have been in high school, we have taken probably ten, including the PSAT, IGAP, TAP, CASE, NEDT, and several others whose names have been forgotten in the swirl of acronyms. The actual administration of the test is not the only problem; the whole school day on which the test comes is wasted because the shortened periods do not allow teachers enough time to accomplish anything and many teachers do not want to give work that might conceivably cause stress during the tests. An inordinate amount of time is also consumed in the preparation teachers are forced to give us before each test. All this time could be spent giving us a real education instead of teaching us how to take multiple-choice tests.

Of even greater concern is the message Whitney Young's emphasis on test scores gives to students. Pressuring everybody to do well on the tests makes

people think that the tests are much more important than they really are. Most of these tests measure very narrow types of learning; there is a definite skill to answering multiple-choice questions that is independent of any useful education, and even the essays are very specifically formatted to see how well we can regurgitate the five-paragraph format drilled into our heads since grammar school. You, the administration and the school board, are telling us that these are the skills we should be pursuing. Free thought and originality seem to have no place in the tests that you so proudly parade as proof of Whitney Young's and the Chicago Public School system's excellence.

The consequences of this foolhardy stress on test scores reach into the self-confidence of many. Students know the administration of the school is preoccupied with test scores. Many of our academic teachers have some sort of test score right next to our names on the roster. That score is the first impression they have of us; we are reduced to numbers. Countless students consider themselves "dumb" merely because a multiple-choice test tells them they are. High-achieving students compare test scores with each other and feel they have to compete to see who can get the best mark. Sometimes it seems people live up to the expectations placed on them. If you continue to tell students who do not score well on tests that their scores show they are deficient, they will continue to do poorly on the tests and often in their classes as well. It is a vicious spiral perpetuated by the administration of this school and the school system.

To the administration of Whitney Young, we do understand that these tests are forced upon the school. However, the proper response to harmful requirements is to largely ignore them. We do not need to be spending time preparing for these tests and in doing so further legitimizing them in the minds of both students at Whitney Young and administrators at the Board of Education. In a Student Union meeting at which this issue was brought up, you told us you had done all you could, and it was time for us to take action. Now we are.

That is why some students will fail the IGAP today. We refuse to feed this test-taking frenzy. We ask that the time and energy spent on standardized tests be reduced to the minimum possible. Teachers should be discouraged from teaching the answers to the tests except when the skills and knowledge form a part of the curriculum those teachers are trying to teach. The school and the school system should show its academic superiority through the quality of its education and the accomplishments of its students rather than the numbers on its test scores.

Will Tanzman et al.

10 refuse to take MCAS

by Adam Groff

At 60 degrees and cloudy, it wasn't optimal weather for a sit-in, but nonetheless, 10 Andover High School sophomores on Tuesday walked out of their required-for-graduation MCAS tests and posted themselves beneath the flag pole in front of the school.

"We're out here because we don't agree with not just how the test is given, but why it's given," said Ari Spool. "We know we can pass it, it just goes against our principles."

Principal Peter Anderson was informed of the students' plans to boycott the test beforehand, and allowed the students to protest.

"It's an intelligent group of kids," said Anderson. "Clearly they'd pass the test. They understand that if they want a diploma from a Massachusetts public school, they have to take it. We're well aware of this group - they're poised, articulate, and reflective. They asked if they could go outside, and we said yes. They did it quietly and respectfully."

The boycott marked the start of two-weeks of testing for the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS). This is the third year the tests have been given. But it is the first year that sophomores must pass the test to graduate from high school. Students who fail the test will have four more chances, two in their junior year and two in their senior year.

"I think we're all aware of the positive intentions of the test," said student protester Dan Mason. "There is a necessity for having standards that you can measure, but to have one, one-size-fits-all, high-stakes test is wrong. We're all different, and there should be multiple forms of assessment. This test trivializes students' talents and abilities."

Foremost among the students' objections to the test is that it might lead to a deadening standardization of education, and that it would leave minorities in underfunded school districts behind. Some referred to the MCAS as the "Massachusetts Caucasian Advancement System."

"The importance of our walking out and not taking this test," said Mason, "is that it puts us in the same boat as kids in communities that don't have the same resources. A big part of this protest is that MCAS encourages a new kind of inauthentic education reform where everything goes to more standardization. It puts education in a box."

The students acknowledged, however, that they do intend to take the test at some point if it continues to be a graduation requirement. Nonetheless, their initial failures will figure in the official tally of Andover students' performance.

"We're hoping to make this not a requirement," said Khaki McElfresh. "It's not because we think we

won't pass. We have five chances to take the test, which is another reason it's ridiculous."

"And they make it easier each time," added Spool. "The theory that students won't fall through the cracks is bunk."

Testing at the high school began at 7:45 a.m., at which time the students said they stood up in their respective classes and read a prepared statement before walking out. They stayed outside for about three hours, returning in time for third period, as they said Principal Peter Anderson asked them to. The students said they intend to boycott the tests for the rest of this week and next, although they plan to protest inside from now on, reading quietly in the library.

"The administration has been very nice, and we're thankful to them," said Spool. "We mean no disrespect."

Asked whether he was concerned that the protest might encourage other students to walk out of the test as well, Anderson said, "I think these kids have thought about what they're doing, and the other kids have thought about what they're doing. They haven't made dissuading other students a part of their program. We've seen other forms of protest, like drawing Christmas trees all over the answer sheets, and frankly I think this is better."

Although the students may not have been aggressively inciting protest, they said they plan to be outside again next week, when the history portion of the test is given to sophomores. This portion is not required for graduation, so the protesters are hoping that their being outside at that time will encourage other students to join them.

Some of the students also said they were planning to attend a rally on Boston Common Tuesday afternoon put on by a group called the Student Coalition for Alternatives to MCAS (SCAM).

Sophomores this week and next are being tested in the areas of English language arts, mathematics, and history and social studies. The sophomore science portion of the test is being revised this year. Passing the English and math portions of the test is required for graduation in 2003.

May 17, 2001 – Andover (MA) Townsman

Students voice WASL opposition

By Linda Shaw
Seattle Times staff reporter

In one of the videos created by Rainier Beach High School freshmen to raise concerns about the Washington Assessment of Student Learning (WASL), students hold up signs to a camera. The message: That using the test as a graduation requirement is a bad idea.

"I thought we were the future," says one sign.

"What about students' lives?" asks another.

Others have put time and effort into promoting the WASL, including the state's Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction. It trained about 170 students this year to promote the value of the standardized test to classmates in many other schools.

But the Rainier Beach students, part of the first class that will have to pass the WASL to graduate, hope to air the opposite view. As part of a media-literacy unit in their honors humanities class, they've produced eight short public-service announcements.

Yesterday they held a news conference in the Seattle school's performing-arts center, and showed the videos publicly last night. They also are talking with KCTS, the Seattle public-broadcasting station, about airing them.

And they didn't waver from their message yesterday, even as reporters peppered them with challenging questions: Why is it bad to feel stress about the test? Couldn't the WASL help motivate students to study harder? Don't students need to keep up with students from other countries?

The students' concern — shared by their teacher, Paula Scott — is that their whole lives can hinge on one test.

"What do you think the kids are going to do if they don't pass the WASL?" wondered Timothy Butler, 15. Angenette Alexander-Royster, 16, said she worries about the WASL because she often doesn't do well on tests, even though she studies.

This year's freshmen across the state will be the first to be required to pass the WASL to graduate. They'll have five opportunities to take the reading, writing and math parts of the test. If they still don't pass all of those, they can take an "alternative assessment," which is now under development.

WASL backers say it's a way to ensure that all graduates are proficient in subjects key to their future success.

The Rainier Beach project came about when Faiza Baker-Yeboah, who works at Central House, a local nonprofit organization with several youth programs, heard the students talking about a test that was nearly a year away. She asked whether they wanted to do something on the WASL as part of the media-literacy unit she was teaching at Rainier Beach.

The Rainier Beach freshmen took the WASL in the 4th and 7th grades, so they have a good idea what it's like. They put about two weeks of research into the project and broke into smaller groups to create the public-service spots.

One goal of the project was to help students use media to make their voices heard.

Judging from the half-dozen TV, radio and newspaper reporters who showed up for the students' press event yesterday, they've already succeeded.

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COMMENTARY

Why I Didn't Graduate

by John Wood

I didn't graduate because I refused to take the Ohio Proficiency Tests.

My high school graduation took place during the Memorial Day weekend. However, despite being ranked sixth in my class, I did not cross the stage that day, and my dad, our high school principal, did not give me a diploma. I did not drop out at the last minute, and I was not expelled. I didn't graduate because I refused to take the Ohio Proficiency Tests.

I did this because I believe these high-stakes tests (which are required for graduation) are biased, irrelevant, and completely unnecessary.

The bias of the tests is demonstrated by Ohio's own statistics. They show consistently that schools with high numbers of low-income and/or minority students score lower on state tests. It is argued (in defense of testing) that this is not the tests' fault, that the scores are only a reflection of the deeper socioeconomic injustices. This is very likely true. What makes the tests biased is the fact that the state does little or nothing to compensate for the differences the students experience outside the classroom. In fact, the state only worsens the situation with its funding system. Ohio's archaic school funding system underfunds schools in poorer areas because it is based on property taxes. How we fund our schools has been declared unconstitutional four times, and yet the state legislature refuses to fix the problem.

The irrelevance of these tests is also demonstrated by state statistics—in this case, the lack of them. In 13 years of testing, Ohio has failed to conduct any studies linking scores on the proficiency tests to college-acceptance rates, college grades, income levels, incarceration rates, dropout rates, scores on military-recruiting tests, or any other similar statistic. State officials said it would be too difficult or costly to keep track of students after high school, but I find this hard to believe. My high school is tracking my class for five years with help from the Coalition of Essential Schools. Certainly the state, with all its bureaucrats, could do the same.

Both of these factors, the tests' biases and their irrelevance, contribute to making Ohio's proficiency testing unnecessary. This system is so flawed it should not be used to determine whether students should graduate. More important, a system already exists for determining when students are ready to graduate. The ongoing assessment by teachers who spend hours with the students is more than sufficient for determining when they are ready to graduate.

This kind of assessment, however, is being undermined by the focus on test preparation, which has eliminated many advanced courses and enrichment experiences. And since the tests do not and cannot measure things such as critical thinking, the ability to work

with others, public speaking, and other characteristics important to democratic citizenship, these are pushed aside while we spend more time memorizing for tests.

After almost a decade and a half, many Ohioans cannot imagine what could be done in place of the state's high-stakes testing. But in southeastern Ohio, alternative assessments are alive and kicking. At my school, Federal Hocking High School, in Stewart, Ohio, every senior has to complete a senior project (I built a kayak), compile a graduation portfolio, and defend his or her work in front of a panel of teachers in order to graduate. These types of performance assessments are much more individualized and authentic, and are certainly difficult, something I can attest to, having completed them myself. There may be a place for standardized tests in public education, but they should not be used to determine graduation.

It is because of these reasons I decided to take a stand against the Ohio Proficiency Tests, even though it would cost me my graduation and diploma. Why such a drastic measure? The reason is simple: Someone has to say no. Education is the key to maintaining our democracy, and I have become disgusted by the indifference displayed by lawmakers who make statements about the value of public education while continuing to fail to fairly and adequately fund it or commit to performance-based assessments.

I have written a number of state senators and representatives from both parties recommending that the state allow districts to set alternatives to high-stakes tests for graduation. Having done everything required for graduation but take the tests, I thought my situation would provide them an opportunity to rethink testing. Sadly, I have not received a response from any of them, even after personally approaching and rewriting them.

What this has taught me is that one voice is not enough, and to make a difference in our democracy, the people must speak with a unified voice. I encourage everyone concerned about the damage being done by high-stakes testing and inadequate funding of public education to speak out. Join me in just saying no to high-stakes testing.

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