

Standardized testing for five-year-olds

US moves toward two-track education system

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ACT, Inc., formerly known as American College Testing, in partnership with leading multi-billion-dollar global education company Pearson, announced in July the creation of a “new series of tests to measure how students—as young as 5—are acquiring the skills and knowledge they need to be ready for college and careers.”

The tests will look at performance both inside and outside the classroom, meaning that academic skills and factors such as behavior and outside interests will be assessed. ACT claims that the assessments are a response to the college and career skills gap issue, and will be aligned to the newly developed “common core standards.” ACT hopes that these tests, also known as “next generation assessments,” to be implemented beginning in 2014, will become part of the educational system nationally.

There will be assessments given during courses, at the end of courses and at the end of the school year. Some will be mandatory and some will be optional. As ACT’s education division president Jon Erickson puts it, “The problem with testing is that before it was imposed on the student ... they should own it.”

This is both ludicrous and deceptive. A growing number of students, parents, teachers, and entire school districts are speaking out against the overuse and overreliance on standardized tests and are looking for ways to end the practice. These new assessments represent a massive escalation of both the frequency of testing and the number of children tested.

Not only is there increasing concern and anger over the overuse of standardized tests, but there are also many unresolved questions over the dependability of the tests themselves. According to a *May Republic Report* article, 232 Texas school districts have adopted resolutions calling for a re-evaluation of the test-centered education provided to students. This is in response to a growing body of research that indicates the standardized tests used to evaluate children and their teachers are critically flawed.

A 2012 *New York Times* article headlined “A Serious Design Flaw is Suspected in State Tests” states that University of Texas at Austin professor Walter Stroup’s research threatens to “shake the foundation of high-stakes test-based accountability.” Researchers in the study “believe they have found ... a glitch embedded in the DNA of the state exams that, as a result of a statistical method used to assemble them, suggests they are virtually useless at measuring the effects of classroom instruction.” The tests in question were created by Pearson.

Pearson has a five-year contract worth \$468 million to create

tests for Texas schools through 2015. Pearson uses “item response theory” (I.R.T.) in its standardized tests, as do other testing companies. “Using I.R.T., developers select questions based on a model that correlates students’ ability with the probability that they will get a question right,” the *Times* article notes. “That produces a test that Mr. Stroup said is more sensitive to how it ranks students than to measuring what they have learned.”

This explains why “students’ scores on the previous year’s TAKS [Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills] test were a better predictor of performance on the next year’s TAKS test than the benchmark exams were... The benchmark exams were developed by the district, the TAKS by the testing company.”

In response to these findings, Gloria Zyskowski, the deputy associate commissioner who handles assessments at the Texas Education Agency, stated that the agency needed more time to review the findings. She also stated that “Mr. Stroup’s comments ... reflected ‘fundamental misunderstandings’ about test development and that there was no evidence of a flaw in the test.”

There is also anger over the effects of over-testing on students’ psychological well-being. In comments posted by parents and teachers on articles related to standardized testing, expressions of anger and resistance are rampant. One commenter asks, “Why isn’t it considered child abuse to expect an eight year old to take a 2½ hour test? Or a nine year old? Or a ten year old?... Who determined this was appropriate for these children?”

In the unanimous 1954 Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka*, the justices argued against racial segregation not only as a matter of the unconstitutionality of the concept of “separate but equal,” but also on the detrimental effects such a practice had on black children: “The impact is greater when it has the sanction of law,” for the policy of separation “is usually interpreted as denoting the inferiority of the negro group. A sense of inferiority affects the motivation of a child to learn.”

The current practice of labeling large numbers of students in high-poverty schools as failures, due to poor performance on unproven, state-mandated tests, is a grave injustice of similar proportions. It is carried out under the cynical claim that the tests help children in poverty, especially African-Americans, by identifying the schools they attend as under-performing. The schools are then stripped of funding, experienced teachers are laid off or fired, and eventually the school is either privatized or closed. The low-performing students must then hope they will be accepted into a privatized charter school, find another public school to

attend, or drop out of school all together.

As for the claim that the new assessment can determine college readiness as early as five years old, ACT's Erickson says that it "will measure foundational skills in reading and math that are the important building blocks for longer-term, higher order skills." In response to concerns that the tests will be used to track students, Erickson responds, "We are not looking to label anybody" as it is "admittedly absurd to think that anybody is going to identify a student's career path" as early as five years old. However, this is precisely how similar assessments are being used in Britain.

There, testing and standardization have grown rapidly over the past decade. After the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988, Standard Assessment Tests (SATs) were implemented for children beginning at age five, leading gradually to the practice of "streaming," where children are placed into different classes based on their supposed academic ability. Streaming is akin to tracking in the US.

There is growing criticism of the pressure young children face in British schools, where standardized testing occurs with ever greater frequency and is of extreme consequence for the quality of the child's long-term education. According to an article published on the WSWS in 2008, "English primary education criticised in report," British children under five years of age are "subjected to a proscriptive curriculum and testing," including meeting standards in reading, writing and math, of which there are 72 prescribed learning goals.

In England alone, one in six junior school children are streamed, despite the fact that research has shown that this practice "can cause long term damage to a child's educational achievements and aspirations." (See "One in six junior school children streamed in England") This practice is carried out under the pretense of helping children "overcome educational disadvantages associated with social class."

In the US, the Obama administration is attempting to implement tracking in public education through its creation of the "College and Career Ready" common core curriculum standards. These policies run counter to those of the founders of the American Republic, representatives of the progressive bourgeoisie whose ideas were influenced by the Enlightenment.

Education was considered crucial to the proper working of a representative democracy, where the population should be educated not only in the basics of reading, writing and arithmetic, but also in history and the social sciences. A system of tax-supported public education for all members of society also allows the nation to benefit from the talents of all of its citizens, regardless of their socioeconomic background.

Today's elite, on the other hand, views education as a means of preserving the status quo, with a diminishing section of the working class meriting access to a higher education. The rest will be tracked into a "career" curriculum, meaning training in basic skills needed for low-wage jobs or serving in the military.

The two-track system of education currently being espoused was an option that could have been adopted in the United States in earlier periods. It was solidly rejected, however, as it was recognized as undemocratic and dangerous to the survival of the Republic. That was in a period when American capitalism was in

its ascendance. Now, with American capitalism in decline, a mass of easily exploitable, cheap workers is needed by the ruling class, and so universal access to a well-rounded education is untenable.

With the rapid growth of standardization and testing, students face a dire future. The development of early assessments meant to determine if students are college or low-wage job material as early as kindergarten, millions of children will be placed into tracks that limit their future options and potential. However, the development of the common core standards is not meant to be limited to American education. The real intent is to create a set of global curriculum standards and assessments, making it far simpler, and profitable, for the firms involved in creating the curriculum materials, software, and assessments.

The Partnership for the Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), a consortium of states working to develop a common set of K-12 assessments in English and math "anchored in what it takes to be ready for college and careers," claims that these next-generation assessments will benefit students because they "will know if they are on track to graduate ready for college and careers." It also claims the assessments will help teachers by providing them with regular test results that will help them to "guide learning and instruction."

In reality, the assessments represent a further attack on teachers, whose job security is more and more exclusively tied to their students' test scores. The national teachers' unions, the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers, have agreed to abide by the reform agenda and all of its requirements, including tying teachers' evaluations and job security to student test scores and merit-pay schemes.

The belief that education is the social leveler in American society is incompatible with a system that places students on tracks for either college or "jobs" as early as kindergarten. Public education, including free, quality higher education, is a necessity in a modern society and is one of the basic social rights of the working class. It must be defended against such retrograde measures as standardized tests aimed at tracking students' futures along class lines.



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