

TOPIC #8: Is the use of standardized tests improving education in America?

While opponents of standardized testing say tests are unreliable and discriminatory, proponents argue that they are reliable and non-discriminatory.

In your response, analyze the two articles taken from www.procon.org to determine which position is best supported. Use relevant and specific evidence from both articles to support your response.

Article 1

(1) Standardized testing has not improved student achievement. After No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was passed in 2002, the US slipped from 18th in the world in math on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) to 31st place in 2009, with a similar drop in science and no change in reading. A May 26, 2011, National Research Council report found no evidence test-based incentive programs are working: "Despite using them for several decades, policymakers and educators do not yet know how to use test-based incentives to consistently generate positive effects on achievement and to improve education."

(2) Standardized tests are an unreliable measure of student performance. A 2001 study published by the Brookings Institution found that 50 – 80% of year-over-year test score improvements were temporary and "caused by fluctuations that had nothing to do with long-term changes in learning."

(3) Standardized tests are unfair and discriminatory against non-English speakers and students with special needs. English language learners take tests in English before they have mastered the language. Special education students take the same tests as other children, receiving few of the accommodations usually provided to them as part of their Individualized Educational Plans (IEPs).

(4) Standardized tests measure only a small portion of what makes education meaningful. According to the late educator researcher Gerald W. Bracey, PhD, qualities that standardized tests cannot measure include "creativity, critical thinking, resilience, motivation, persistence, curiosity, endurance, reliability, enthusiasm, empathy, self-awareness, self-discipline, leadership, civic-mindedness, courage, compassion, resourcefulness, sense of beauty, sense of wonder, honesty, integrity."

(5) "Teaching to the test" is replacing good teaching practices with "drill 'n' kill" rote learning. A five-year University of Maryland study completed in 2007 found "the pressures teachers were feeling to 'teach to the test'" since NCLB was leading to "declines in teaching higher-order thinking, in the amount of time spent on complex assignments, and in the actual amount of high cognitive content in the curriculum."

Article 2

(1) Ninety-three percent (93%) of studies on student testing, including the use of large-scale and high-stakes standardized tests, found a “positive effect” on student achievement, according to a peer-reviewed, 100-year analysis of testing research completed in 2011 by testing scholar Richard P. Phelps.

(2) Standardized tests are reliable and objective measures of student achievement. Without them, policy makers would have to rely on tests scored by individual schools and teachers who have a vested interest in producing favorable results. Multiple-choice tests, in particular, are graded by machine and therefore are not subject to human subjectivity or bias.

(3) Standardized tests are inclusive and non-discriminatory because they ensure content is equivalent for all students. Former Washington, DC, schools chancellor Michelle Rhee argues that using alternate tests for minorities or exempting children with disabilities would be unfair to those students: “You can’t separate them, and to try to do so creates two, unequal systems, one with accountability and one without it. This is a civil rights issue.”

(4) China has a long tradition of standardized testing and leads the world in educational achievement. China displaced Finland as number one in reading, math, and science when Shanghai debuted on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) rankings in 2009. Despite calls for a reduction in standardized testing, China’s testing regimen remains firmly in place. Chester E. Finn, Jr., Chairman of the Hoover Institution’s Koret Task Force on K – 12 Education, predicts that Chinese cities will top the PISA charts for the next several decades.

(5) “Teaching to the test” can be a good thing because it focuses on essential content and skills, eliminates time-wasting activities that don’t produce learning gains, and motivates students to excel. The US Department of Education stated in November 2004 that “if teachers cover subject matter required by the standards and teach it well, then students will master the material on which they will be tested – and probably much more.”