

**A Call for Action: Revamping Standardized Testing to Grant Children Their  
Fundamental Right to a Fair and Equitable Education**

“I believe the children are our future, teach them well and let them lead the way.”  
--Whitney Houston

In the landmark case of Brown v. Board of Education, the United States Supreme Court ruled that no child should be “expected to succeed in life if . . . denied the opportunity of an education.”<sup>i</sup> It can hardly be argued that “an inferior education offers a child a life stripped of the possibility for rewarding and productive work and participation in this increasingly wealthy society,” and thus, quality education becomes a fundamental right of each and every child.<sup>ii</sup> Teachers become vital in this equation to help achieve the goal set out by Brown so many years ago. “Simply put, the job of the educator is to help students to achieve their full potential.”<sup>iii</sup> Teachers must be accountable for the achievement of their students.

The national “crusade” for educational reform has focused on improving teacher training, increasing resources, and tougher standards for student achievement.<sup>iv</sup> The question that remains, however, is how can this right be ensured and achieved to each and every child through his or her schooling? As this article will show, this ultimate objective can be met through a revolutionary overhaul of standardized tests currently utilized while increasing litigation in the area to ascertain this opportunity of every child a chance to a successful life in whichever field they choose. Moreover, teachers become responsible for their individual students thus creating their duty to objectively observe them on a day-to-day basis rather than a test administered once every few years.

Accountability has become a primary concern for parents, administrators, and politicians alike. Whose responsibility is it to make this fundamental right available and attainable by all children?

Parents want to ensure they are sending their children to adequate schools, administrators want to prove their success as managers in keeping their schools to standards, and politicians have used school performances as platforms for elections. How can all three remain satisfied? Though all three groups are attempting to achieve the same goal, mainly that schools that produce children fit to excel in society, individual priorities often create controversy. Parents have a primary concern that *their* individual children are the product of those schools while politicians would like numerical proof that the schools in their areas are proving themselves on a national playing field. Administrators, however, while trying to satisfy both extremes, have the added obstacle of arming their teachers with the adequate tools to complete this daunting task while pleasing the politicians to guarantee they receive the ample funding to do so.

Thus, the struggle begins as to what a proper judge of this accountability is, and that, as of late, has been the extreme of standardized testing.

Drafting standards that apply to all students in all locations is an ongoing struggle, and this area of concern, and law, is continuing to grow. As of May 1, 2009, the Delegate Assembly of the National School Boards Association voted to adopt a position on national standards, while still maintaining local control of school districts.<sup>v</sup> While NSBA opposes the federal government developing standards, it does believe that a common set of standards, not mandated by the federal government but supported by it, can lead to raising student achievement.<sup>vi</sup> This article proposes that the existing

standards remain inadequate in providing a child the means to successfully function in the modern world, and thus, regardless of who takes charge, standardized tests should be framed with that aim in mind.

Test makers must look at the current status of standardized test and edit them accordingly. Tests with this great weight should not take performance of all students on one day to form the basis for the “grading” of its school. A complete makeover of administered standardized tests is in order to grant children their right to an education.

Additionally, test makers must be very wary of creating tests that would judge students based on backgrounds. “Instead of promoting educational excellence for all students, high-stakes tests often unfairly deny educational opportunities to students based on their race, ethnicity, sex or disability.”<sup>vii</sup> As a fundamental right, education should not be denied to any child because of their race, sex, or ethnicity, and this should be approached very gently in the standardized testing forum.

By revamping standardized testing, in its current state while continuing to fixate upon a child’s fundamental right to an adequate and fair education, children can be ensured to receive the education they need and deserve to thrive in society.

### **Radical Critics of Standardized Testing**

“Allowing the continued misuse of high-stakes tests is, in itself, a gross failure of moral imagination, a failure both of educators and of policymakers, who persistently refuse to provide the educational resources necessary to guarantee an equal opportunity to learn for all of our children.” --U.S. Senator Paul D. Wellstone, March 31, 2000<sup>viii</sup>

Though many individuals have openly distrusted the current standardized testing procedures, arguably the leading and most outspoken individual against standardized testing is Alfie Kohn, a former teacher from Massachusetts.<sup>ix</sup> Kohn, in his book, The

Case Against Standardized Testing: Raising Scores, Ruining the Schools, argues that standardized testing is a “monster in our schools,” and fails to accomplish any goals of furthering education of our children.<sup>x</sup> According to Kohn, too many people have a stake in performance on these tests, and thus, the “photo opportunity” for politicians when the scores are high, instead of individual achievements, becomes the main objective.<sup>xi</sup>

Kohn raises arguments that standardized testing are made by companies who have monopolized their market to the point of missing the objective, such tests discriminate based upon socioeconomic status and race, and curriculum has been severely shaped for high performance on these tests that children are being robbed of the education they deserve.<sup>xii</sup> As a staunch critic, Kohn does not believe these tests are accurate measures for neither a student’s individual progress nor the progress a school as a whole is making in education.<sup>xiii</sup>

For the individual students, Kohn believes that by focusing on the “right” answer these tests “ignore the process by which student arrive at that answer” ignoring the thinking process altogether.<sup>xiv</sup> As far as teacher accountability, Kohn argues that many factors beyond an individual teacher’s control are too prominent.<sup>xv</sup> “It seems difficult to justify holding a fourth-grade teacher accountable for her students’ test scores when those scores reflect all that has happened to the children before they even arrived at her class.”<sup>xvi</sup> Thus, he believes radical actions should be taken, including the boycotting of all such tests, until they are abandoned altogether.<sup>xvii</sup>

Though valid points, Kohn fails to establish a way to reform standardized testing that would warrant a change in its inadequacies. As an immediate provision, Kohn advocates parents take various actions from bringing their tests qualms to the attention of

lawmakers to refusing attendance on test days.<sup>xviii</sup> Such extreme measures are likely to accomplish little. A qualified group must do the reform on a grand scale. Though Kohn shares distaste for the status quo of high-stakes testing, his vigor is often mistaken as extreme, and thus dismissed. A more agreeable and moderate approach would better serve the students' interests and be more likely to catalyze the much needed change.

Additionally, Kohn does not provide any options to test the accountability of schools. He does mention individual assessments to judge a student's individual successes, but what he fails to mention, is that in the lowest performing schools, lack of parental involvement is widespread. Leaving the final judgment to uninvolved parents would not help the situation. Additionally, the added work to teachers would not be reflected in pay, in the majority of American school districts, and thus, highly qualified teachers would continue to gravitate towards high performing districts. Thus, without a standardized way to judge performance of both individuals and schools, Kohn's plan falls short.

### **A More Moderate Approach**

In his article, "Excellence and Equality in Education: High Standards for High-Stakes Tests," Arthur L. Coleman explores more mainstream improvements to standardized testing while remaining less idealistic to how these changes could occur. Unlike Kohn, Coleman understands the disagreement between how to change these tests yet takes a more open-minded method to the situation. Coleman stresses the importance on teachers to "design and implement the standards-based reforms that include high-

stakes tests intended to measure student achievement” and the role of teachers in achieving this goal.<sup>xix</sup>

Coleman does not dismiss the standardized test altogether understanding they are an important and objective method to judge how well schools are performing. “Tests, in short, should be instruments used by educators to help students achieve their full potential.”<sup>xx</sup> Additionally, he sees the goal of reforming these tests while emphasizing the right to fair and equitable education as a civil right as “mutually dependant, inseparable.”<sup>xxi</sup> Establishing fair and equitable standards should be synonymous with “high expectations.”<sup>xxii</sup> Simply lowering the standards to ensure all students can achieve the same goals would undermine what the original standards of standardized testing were.

Coleman sees the goals of standardized tests to be universal: they can provide “useful, limited guidance in making educational judgments about instruction, placement, and promotional opportunities.”<sup>xxiii</sup> If the tests’ purposes are known and used properly, they can aid in accomplishing all of these goals.

Coleman’s approach is a more practical one, which understands the shortcomings of high-stakes testing while supplying a viable option for improvement. As an adversary for children with an aptitude to work with law and test makers, his approach would be very imperative in aiding in this crisis. The stated limitations of tests should be considered and improved upon. Students should be taught the information they are expected to know in the classroom setting so they are given their Constitutional right to due process in the test they are required to take.<sup>xxiv</sup> In evaluating the results as a whole, Coleman also suggests “not all inequalities are inequalities” meaning that all factors

related to the differences in scores amongst different groups should be taken into account.<sup>xxv</sup>

### **A Call for Action**

In looking at the different proposals for revision, I think that following the guidelines as offered by Coleman make the most sense logically and practically. It is not debated that the tests lack in the substance as they stand. One would be hard pressed to find a group that does not think some sort of educational reform is in order. Completely boycotting the procedure, however, would not be the way to fix the educational systems injuries. It would only create more controversy and make others less willing to compromise.

I propose that standardized tests should be reformed to better mirror a workplace environment to meet the schools' goals of preparing students for such. Rarely would an employee be expected to perform without feedback and discussion with co-workers. As such, tests should allow for the same collaboration. Details of how this can be successfully accomplished would need to be discussed, but a fair way of pairing students in a diverse, small group might better prepare them to survive in the modern work world.

Additionally, tests should offer questions requiring problem solving skills in a group setting while remaining rooted in the original fundamental principles. For example, instead of basic math problems, tests could be written in a more complex manner integrating these simple steps, along with reading comprehension, as a means to the end. The "right" answer would not be a simple formulation but used in the method to get to the final answer. In judging and testing a student's ability to work with others to

complete a complex task with emphasis on *how* they went about that would better reflect what would be expected of them in a future work environment, and thus, along with individual teacher assessments, they could be judged on their skills to accomplish this goal as a reflection of their progress as a student.

On a whole, schools should be judged on their individual progress in these tests in comparison to like schools. Comparing school A to school B is not fair to either schools. School A and school B have different characteristics of their respective areas, parents, and administrators to name a few. All factors should be taken into account, such as geography, socioeconomic status, and funding, when comparing schools. This would hold teachers, along with schools, accountable for performances in relation to schools with similar resources and, thus, similar expectations. Sanctions against schools that are not performing to a national or state level is a harsh penalty and forces schools to lose focus of their purpose. Too much emphasis is placed on the individual tests, which denies children of their civil right to a fair and well-rounded education.

Tests should also be redesigned eliminating the potential for discrimination whether based on race or socioeconomic background. It is almost impossible to create a test to take all aspects of this into account, but if the above protocol is adhered to, outside resources of the various students could be combined to achieve the end result. Additionally, if schools only risk comparison to like those schools on the same level of economic status, outside resources would more greatly mirror each other.

Along with specifics reforms, high-stakes testing, and the results therefrom, must be used in the proper way. Feeding political platforms and as “show” of performance should not be the consequence of adequate testing. Celebration of individual



achievements and reformation at a school level should be done to show students and parents alike the dedication of individual teachers to the cause of improving achievement of their students. Ultimately, I believe it should be left up to individual teachers to make final assessments of improvement, and thus, they should not be held accountable for shortcomings. Doing so would encourage inaccurate results or, even worse, frame curriculum on basics of the tests rather than emphasizing individual needs of students.

Lastly, accuracy in the scoring and administration of these tests is a must. Too often tests are found to be incorrect or results to have errors. This defeats the entire purpose posed by these tests. Instead of sanctions placed on poorly performing schools, sanctions should be place on individual companies responsible for these inconsistencies. Putting more pressure on the drafters of the tests mandates that new laws and criteria are followed to the extent they should be.

### **Conclusion**

It would be naive to think that standardized testing completely fulfills all goals it sets out to achieve. At the same time, simply abandoning ship would result in less achievement for everyone. At all times, it must be remembered that the true victims are the children, not the teachers, administrators, or politicians, and therefore, any changes proposed in the methodology of these tests should benefit the students. Therefore, by acknowledging the shortcomings of the system while attempting to modify it to fit the modern world, the schools are adhering to the original goals of the tests. Creating the future citizens of America is no simple task, but with the right advocates and careful planning, it can be achieved in the end.

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- <sup>i</sup> Brown v. Board of Education, 347 U.S. 483, 493 (1954).
- <sup>ii</sup> 8 GEOJPLP 311, 311 (Summer, 2001).
- <sup>iii</sup> 6 VAJSPL 81, 84 (Fall, 1998).
- <sup>iv</sup> Id. at 81.
- <sup>v</sup> <http://www.nsba.org>
- <sup>vi</sup> Id.
- <sup>vii</sup> 37-Feb JTLATRIAL 41, 41 (February, 2001).
- <sup>viii</sup> 10 BUPILJ 284, 284 (Spring 2001).
- <sup>ix</sup> *Time Magazine*
- <sup>x</sup> Kohn, Alfie. The Case Against Standardized Testing: Rasing Scores, Ruining the Schools. Heinemann Publishing, Portsmouth, New Hampshire: 2000.
- <sup>xi</sup> Id at 17.
- <sup>xii</sup> Id.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Id at 32.
- <sup>xiv</sup> Id at 24.
- <sup>xv</sup> Id at 32.
- <sup>xvi</sup> Id at 20.
- <sup>xvii</sup> Id.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Id at 45.
- <sup>xix</sup> Id.
- <sup>xx</sup> Id. at 55.
- <sup>xxi</sup> 6 VAJSPL 81, 84 (Fall, 1998).
- <sup>xxii</sup> Id.
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Id. at 103.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Id. at 104.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Id. at 108.