

The Negative Effects of High-Stakes Testing

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In this article, I will show that there are multiple negative effects of high-stakes standardized testing. High-stakes testing has become pervasive in the current educational culture and both young students and those entering college are all impacted by the pressure to succeed on standardized tests. While standardized tests may seem to offer an excellent way to accurately assess students, I will show that high-stakes testing leads to numerous negative effects that impact not only the students who take the tests, but also parents, teachers, and schools.

One negative effect of high-stakes testing is the impact on the quality of education that a child receives as a result of the number of standardized tests children take and the push to attain high scores. In the United States, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RttT) have both put a great emphasis on test scores as a means for schools to receive funding. NCLB makes school funding dependent on schools achieving adequate yearly progress in raising test scores on state tests.¹ RttT takes the approach of providing money to states and school districts for implementing such plans as tying teacher evaluations to test scores, merit pay based on test results, and adopting the Common Core State Standards.² As a result of both NCLB and RttT, school funding is strongly aligned to tests scores. This focus has meant that schools and teachers have had to adjust their curriculum and devote valuable learning time to test-preparation. Jesse Hagopian notes a 2013 American Federation of Teachers study that analyzed class time devoted to test-preparation.³ The study was based on two mid-sized urban school districts and found that the students spent up to 50 hours per year taking standardized tests. The study also found that “students spent from 60 to more than 110 hours per year directly engaged in test preparation activities”.⁴ Students also take a sheer number of exams. In some states, “students entering kindergarten will take a *minimum* of 16 state tests before graduation”.⁵ For students who are English Language Learners, there are even more tests. These include exams in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, all beginning in kindergarten.⁶ The amount of time devoted to testing also varies by state. For example, in Bibb County, Georgia, “a state or national exam is given to elementary, middle, or high-school students in 70 of 180 school days”.⁷ Students in Maryland have state testing 55 days out of the school year.⁸ In Texas, 51 days are devoted to testing and in Michigan, 50 days.⁹

Another reason for the constant focus on testing comes from the testing companies themselves. The corporations that design and score exams make huge profits from them, so they

¹ Jesse Hagopian, *Preface: The Testocracy versus the Education Spring in MORE THAN A SCORE: THE NEW UPRISING AGAINST HIGH-STAKES TESTING* 7, 9 (Jesse Hagopian ed., Haymarket Books, 2014).

² *Id.*

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ GEORGE MADAUS, MICHAEL RUSSELL & JENNIFER HIGGINS, *THE PARADOXES OF HIGH STAKES TESTING: HOW THEY AFFECT STUDENTS, THEIR PARENTS, TEACHERS, PRINCIPALS, SCHOOLS, AND SOCIETY* 1 (Information Age Publishing, 2009).

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.* at 2.

⁸ *Id.* at 2.

⁹ *Id.* at 2.

have an incentive to create and sell more tests. According to Hagopian, the textbook and testing industry generates roughly \$20 billion to \$30 billion per year.¹⁰ Further, Pearson, the world's largest education company earns more than \$9 billion annually.¹¹ In the age of accountability, these companies also profit from the schools' intense desire to have students perform well on the tests. This leads to the testing companies also being able to sell teaching materials designed to help students attain higher scores.¹²

All of this time spent preparing for standardized tests and actually taking the tests, means that teachers have to focus on subjects that are tested and teach test-taking skills. Since subjects such as music, art, social studies, science, and physical education are not tested, teachers often have less time to devote to these areas. In a 2001 national survey that asked teachers about the effect of high-stakes testing on non-tested subjects and other areas, roughly 80% of the teachers reported that they increased the time spent on tested subjects and nearly 50% stated that they decreased time on non-tested subjects such as foreign languages, fine arts, physical education, and field trips and other enrichment activities.¹³ In a study by the Center on Educational Policy, it was shown that 71% of school districts reduced time in at least one subject in order to expand the time allotted for the tested subjects of reading and math. At the same time, 33% of districts reduced time for social studies, 29% reduced time for science, and 22% reduced the time for art and music.¹⁴ For some schools, the reduction in time for non-tested subjects also includes recess.¹⁵

The emphasis on tested subjects diminishes the educational experience that children receive because teachers have to focus on preparing students for tests. In *More Than a Score*, teacher Brian Jones describes the day when he was leading his 4th grade class in a science project. The children had their experiments set up around the room and were all eagerly participating when the supervisor walked into the room and announced that the project would stop so that the class could begin working on test-prep. Mr. Jones initially thought that the students could complete the project first, and then begin the test-prep. The supervisor then made it clear that the project would stop immediately, in the middle of the experiment.¹⁶

The emphasis on tested subjects also leads to a narrowing of the curriculum. In addition to decreased emphasis on non-tested subjects, teachers are given a set curriculum that may not allow the students to focus on deep analysis, critical thinking, and engage in culturally relevant materials. Lisa McNeil mentions the story of a teacher in Texas who wanted to provide these

¹⁰ Hagopian, *Preface, supra*, at 10.

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² ALFIE KOHN, *THE CASE AGAINST STANDARDIZED TESTING: RAISING THE SCORES, RUINING THE SCHOOLS 3* (Heinemann, 2000).

¹³ MADAUS ET AL., *supra*, at 149.

¹⁴ *Id.* at 150.

¹⁵ *Id.* at 151.

¹⁶ Brian Jones, *Standardized Testing and Students of Color in MORE THAN A SCORE: THE NEW UPRISING AGAINST HIGH-STAKES TESTING 70, 71* (Jesse Hagopian ed., Haymarket Books, 2014).

critical aspects of learning to her students.¹⁷ As a teacher in a predominantly Latino high-school, she had assembled multiple historical and literary works of importance in Latino culture for her students and they responded with enthusiasm and eagerness to learn. However, one day after returning from lunch, she found that the books she planned to use for the week's lesson were set aside and a stack of test-prep booklets along with a teacher's guide were on the center of her desk. Along with the books was a note instructing her to use the materials until after the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). The teacher also later learned that the principal spent \$20,000 on the materials, the entire instructional budget for the year. Using the materials meant that students who had been "analyzing poetry of Gary Soto and exploring generational themes in *Bless Me Ultima* had to instead do single page activities, with brief reading selections followed by TAAS-type answer questions.¹⁸ These types of test questions further narrow the curriculum by preventing students from appreciating whole texts. In a 1990 report by the National Commission on Testing and Public Policy, "the report describes how '[i]nstead of reading books, students in many classrooms read isolated paragraphs and practice answering multiple-choice questions about them'".¹⁹ The focus on short passages has prevented many students from experiencing the joy of reading complete literary works. According to an English department head of a British secondary school, "It is possible to obtain a top grade on a national exit exam without ever reading a book in its entirety".²⁰ Further, teachers at high-schools where TAAS-prep replaced the curriculum, teachers reported that although more students were passing the reading portion of the test, "[f]ew of [the students] can use reading for assignments in literature, science or history classes; few of them choose to read; few of them can make meaning of literature or connect writing and discussing to reading".²¹

Another way that testing narrows curriculum is the fact that skills and content that are tested at upper grades trickle down to lower grades. Thus, the high-stakes testing that occurs for older students affects younger students, even those in non-tested grades, by changing their curriculum to make the young students ready for the tests in the future. As a result, the curriculum is altered across grades because content and skills that are covered on upper grade tests displace content and skills normally taught in lower grades.²² For example, in kindergarten and first grade, where the emphasis should be on social, emotional, and physical goals for children, the curriculum has shifted to include more academic skills.²³

Standardized testing even negatively impacts students who are not currently being tested. Hagopian mentions that as a history teacher, his class was not one of the subjects tested on the

¹⁷ LINDA M. MCNEIL, *CONTRADICTIONS OF SCHOOL REFORM: EDUCATIONAL COSTS OF STANDARDIZED TESTING* 236 (Routledge, 2000).

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ MADAUS ET AL., *supra*, at 141.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ MCNEIL, *supra*, at 237.

²² MADAUS ET AL., *supra*, at 141.

²³ *Id.* at 151.

MAP test, however, the students were not allowed to use the school library computers “three times a year for three weeks at a time” due to the test being administered on those computers.²⁴ Therefore, he had difficulty assigning research papers during the testing period because students were not able to check out books from the library or use the library computers. The problem of restricted access was especially significant for low-income students who lacked Internet access at home.²⁵

High-stakes standardized testing also negatively impacts teachers. Teachers use their expertise to design lessons that actively engage students and foster the development of critical thinking skills. They use their creativity to develop lessons that encourage their students to explore new topics and better understand the world around them. The intense focus on test-prep devalues the teacher’s deep knowledge and ability to make connections with students in their classrooms. One 8th grade English teacher mentioned that prior to the focus on test-prep, she engaged her students in many project-based learning activities. These included writing plays, writing poetry, and performance activities. In order to prepare students for the tests, she had to discontinue many of these learning opportunities.²⁶

The negative impact on teachers also extends to a devaluing of their professional judgment. As teachers are in classrooms with their students on a daily basis, they have extensive knowledge of their students’ abilities and achievement. “Given this wealth of data collected over time, the teacher is better positioned to evaluate student achievement than a one-off high-stakes test.”²⁷ Further, the focus on standardized tests to make decisions about students signals mistrust of the teacher’s own judgment.²⁸ As Diane Ravitch noted, respect for teachers is one of the main differences between the educational systems of the U.S. and Finland, which has one of the most successful educational systems.²⁹

Another negative impact on teachers is the use of high-stakes tests results in the performance evaluations of teachers. Thus, in addition to teachers being forced to teach to the test, a teacher’s rating, and ultimately job security due to closures of under-performing schools, may depend on how well students perform on standardized tests. The 2012 Chicago Teachers Union strike highlighted this point as one of the major points of contention was the extent to which standardized tests would be used in performance evaluations.³⁰ The school district wanted

²⁴ Jesse Hagopian, *Our Destination is Not on the MAP in MORE THAN A SCORE: THE NEW UPRISING AGAINST HIGH-STAKES TESTING* 31, 34 (Jesse Hagopian, ed., Haymarket Books, 2014).

²⁵ *Id.*

²⁶ MADAUS ET AL., *supra*, at 146.

²⁷ *Id.* at 90.

²⁸ *Id.* at 102.

²⁹ Noam Chomsky and Arianne Robichaud, *Standardized Testing as an Assault on Humanism and Critical Thinking in Education*, 11 Issue 1 RADICAL PEDAGOGY 3 (Winter 2014).

³⁰ Michael Pearson, *Wins, losses, and draws in Chicago school strike*, CNN.COM (Updated 6:32 pm ET, September 19, 2012) <http://www.cnn.com/2012/09/19/us/illinois-chicago-teachers-strike/index.html>.

the test scores to count for as much as 45% of the evaluations, but according to the contract agreement, they will count for no more than 30%.³¹

Another problem of standardized tests is their lack of usefulness for a teacher. Many tests are offered when students are in one grade level, but the scores are not received until the student has already progressed to the next grade. Thus, the teacher receives no information that could help inform the instruction of that child.³² Additionally, even if the teacher does receive the test scores in time to provide support for a student, a multiple-choice test provides a teacher little information other than whether the answer was right or wrong. The test does not tell the teacher how the student arrived at the answer or whether it was just a lucky guess. The test also does not tell the teacher if the student had advanced reasoning despite selecting an incorrect answer.³³

Additionally, high-stakes testing does not necessarily reflect an accurate assessment of a student's abilities. One reason for this is that standardized tests tend to measure a student's access to resources rather than skill in a particular area.³⁴ Thus, students who live in wealthier districts tend to perform better on standardized tests because they have better resourced schools, more access to private tutoring, access to specialized test-prep agencies, greater access to books at home, and greater access to both high-quality healthcare and healthy food.³⁵

Another reason that standardized testing may not accurately measure a student's abilities is that the tests may not reflect the values of a community or the tests may be culturally biased. For example, prior to attending school, children from some backgrounds may not have a clear understanding of what testing is because in their community, adults do not ask them to function as "information givers".³⁶ In other cultures, skills that are emphasized for children are not those that are tested. For some Native American children, for example, the culture emphasizes nonverbal communication, spatial skills, sequential visual memory, and motor skills along with sharing and working together. Whereas the tests that children take in school emphasize verbal skills and working alone.³⁷ In order to show that standardized tests are often written with an inherent cultural bias, some students at the Prologue Alternative High School in Chicago wrote their own test based on the experiences of young people in the Uptown neighborhood.³⁸ Questions on the test include: "A person who is 'properdopolis' is a) Greek b) cool c) from the city d) a bank worker"; "Something that is 'wack' is a) dangerous b) good c) the best d) bad";

³¹ Pearson, *supra*.

³² Hagopian, *Preface, supra*, at 14.

³³ *Id.*

³⁴ *Id.*

³⁵ *Id.* at 15.

³⁶ MADAUS ET AL., *supra*, at 61.

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ Deborah Stern, *Testing . . . 1,2,3 in CITY KIDS, CITY TEACHERS: REPORTS FROM THE FRONT ROW* 66, 66 (William Ayers and Patricia Ford, eds., The New Press, 1996).

and “To ‘kick it’ means to a) go with someone b) to fight c) to play football d) both a and c”.³⁹ According to the authors, the correct answers are, in order: b, d, and a.⁴⁰ Noam Chomsky and Arianne Robichaud give a similar example of the way in which socio-economic class impacts students on standardized tests.⁴¹ On a 6th grade science test, the students were instructed to identify the item that “is not a fruit” by selecting choices that do not contain seeds. “The choices are A) orange, B) pumpkin, C) apple, D) celery”.⁴² Many children would know from their experiences with celery that it contains no seeds. However, children whose parents cannot afford to buy celery may not have encountered it and therefore, are unaware that it has no seeds. Further, depending on their experiences, children may not be familiar with pumpkins either.⁴³

In addition to other negative effects, high-stakes testing may provide students with tests that are not developmentally appropriate or that cover material not taught at their level. Young students, for example, learn through hands-on experiences. Play-based learning allows them to explore, to question, and to solve problems. These are skills that cannot be quantified because they develop over a long period of time and the development is often not linear.⁴⁴ Thus, standardized tests are not the optimal way to gauge young students’ achievement. This would be best done by a teacher who is able to observe the students’ activities and behaviors.⁴⁵ As an example of the extent to which tests foster developmentally inappropriate school activities, Nancy Carlsson-Paige described watching 4 year olds sit in chairs as they endured a scripted curriculum aligned to tests when they should have been engaged in play-based activities.⁴⁶

In order to demonstrate that high-stakes tests may be developmentally inappropriate and simply too challenging for students, administrators and teachers at the South Shore Fine Arts Academy in Chicago offered practice PARCC assessments to parents during report card pick-up days.⁴⁷ The new Common-Core aligned test, Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), was taken by approximately 50 parents and few chose to finish the entire exam. Many parents stated that the exam was demanding and that they had difficulty staying focused. Further, one parent stated, “The reading seems very, very, very challenging. I took the 3rd grade test and the comprehension level that you have to have was almost beyond me.”⁴⁸

³⁹ Stern, *supra*, at 66-69.

⁴⁰ *Id.* at 70.

⁴¹ Chomsky et al., *supra*.

⁴² *Id.*

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ Nancy Carlsson-Paige, *Defending Young Children in MORE THAN A SCORE: THE NEW UPRISING AGAINST HIGH-STAKES TESTING* 85, 86 (Jesse Hagopian, ed., Haymarket Books, 2014).

⁴⁵ *Id.* at 87.

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ Jeff Naumann, *Parents Weigh in on PARCC Practice Assessment*, CHICAGO UNION TEACHER, January 2015, 37, 38.

⁴⁸ *Id.*

Another negative effect of high-stakes testing is that it is often used as a method to determine graduation or deny further educational opportunities. In these situations, a single standardized test can be determinative of a student's future. For example, roughly 29 states require students to pass a state mandated test in order to graduate from high-school.⁴⁹ In order to draw attention to the idea that a single test should not be the basis for whether a student is allowed to graduate from high school, members of the Providence Student Union decided to protest the New England Common Assessment Program (NECAP).⁵⁰ They decided to administer a mock exam based on questions released by the Rhode Island Department of Education every year. The students assembled a group of 50 volunteers which included "state representatives, state senators, city council members, senior aides to the mayor of Providence, accomplished attorneys, directors of major non-profits, Ivy League professors, a former Democratic nominee for governor, a[n] NBC news anchor, and a scientist or two."⁵¹ 60% of the group of volunteers did not score highly enough on the mock exam to graduate under the new high-stakes testing graduation requirement.⁵²

Several countries use a similar model of a single exam to determine high-school graduation or a single exam with multiple parts. Either way, high-stakes testing around the world leads to intense levels of stress and anxiety for students given that all of their hard work over the years comes down to one test. In England, for example, Dylan William, professor emeritus of educational assessment at the University of London states that, "At the age of 16, almost every child in England will take probably about 15 or 20 substantial examinations."⁵³ "These are all part of one test and the results determine both whether they finish high-school and which universities will offer them a place."⁵⁴ According to Pasi Sahlberg, the only external standardized test in Finland is the National Matriculation Examination, which all students must pass in order to graduate from high school and enter university.⁵⁵ In describing his own experience taking the national exam, which consists of roughly a half-dozen day long exams, Sahlberg states, "It was very clear for everybody that unless you do very well with this one examination, that some of these dreams that you may have for the future will become very difficult to fulfill."⁵⁶

⁴⁹ MADAUS ET AL., *supra*, at 2.

⁵⁰ Cauldierre McKay, Aaron Regunberg & Tim Shea, *Testing Assumptions: Zombies, Flunkies, and The Providence Student Union in MORE THAN A SCORE: THE NEW UPRISING AGAINST HIGH-STAKES TESTING* 135, 135 (Jesse Hagopian ed., Haymarket Books, 2014).

⁵¹ *Id.* at 138.

⁵² *Id.* at 139.

⁵³ Cory Turner, *U.S. Tests Teens a Lot, But Worldwide, Exam Stakes are Higher*, NPR.ORG, (April 30, 2014, 4:00 pm ET) <http://www.npr.org/2014/04/30/308057862/u-s-tests-teens-a-lot-but-worldwide-exam-stakes-are-higher>.

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ Valerie Strauss, *The brainy questions on Finland's only high-stakes standardized test*, WASHINGTONPOST.COM, (March 24, 2014) <http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/answer-sheet/wp/2014/03/24/the-brainy-questions-on-finlands-only-high-stakes-standardized-test/>.

⁵⁶ Turner, *supra*.

Other countries have similar single exams that determine a students' future. In China, for example, students take the *gaokao*, the national college entrance examination.⁵⁷ Students taking the test often feel the intense pressure to succeed. Due to China's one-child policy, "a family's chance to change its fortune often rests on the shoulders of a single child."⁵⁸ However, just as in the U.S., the quality of education in China varies by region and students who attend better schools have a better chance of doing well on the exam. This is particularly important given that the exam is the sole measure used for college admittance. Further, elite universities such as Beijing's Peking and Tsinghua reserve more spaces for students from the capital than the provinces. *Time* notes that, "In 2014, Peking admitted 0.28%, or 200, of Beijing's 70,500 high school students, but only 0.02%, or 143, from the nearby province of Shandong's 657,000-strong graduating class."⁵⁹

In South Korea, students face a similar fierce competition for education based on an exam. The educational system is designed around a competitive entrance examination in which students compete to enter good middle-schools, high-schools, and colleges.⁶⁰ Due to the intense competition to score well on the exams, for-profit tutoring institutions, *Hagwons*, are very popular for families that can afford them.⁶¹ According to the Korea Ministry of Education, Science, and Technology, in 2011, there were 5,892 private educational institutions out of the 19,865 total education institutions.⁶² Further, almost 40% of the students studying in South Korea attended a *Hagwon*.⁶³

Singapore presents another example of a country where exams determine a student's future. Students are placed in subject-based bands depending on their performance on exams starting at age 10. At ages 16 or 17, their scores on exams determine whether they will attend a junior college, which will offer them the best chance of attending university, or a technical institute.⁶⁴ Although, Singapore is currently attempting to attract students to "earn and learn" programs that will place technical school graduates in jobs, Singaporean families still feel

⁵⁷ Emily Rauhala, *China's Big Test: Cheating Allegations Dog Chinese Students Applying to U.S. Colleges – But the Reality is More Complex*, TIME, April 13, 2015, at 36, 39.

⁵⁸ *Id.* at 39-40.

⁵⁹ *Id.* at 40.

⁶⁰ Osman Ozturgut, *Learning By Example: Standardized Testing in the Cases of China, Korea, Japan, and Taiwan*, 9 ISSUE 3 ACADEMIC LEADERSHIP JOURNAL (15337812) 1, 4 (2011).

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² *Id.*

⁶³ *Id.*

⁶⁴ Sharon Chen, *Singapore is Cracking Down on Tiger Moms*, FINANCE.YAHOO.COM, (May 4, 2015, 1:57 am EDT) <http://finance.yahoo.com/news/singapore-wants-kids-skip-college-160100260.html>.

strongly that college is the path to success.⁶⁵ To that end, in 2013, Singapore households spent \$1.1 billion on tutors to prepare students to get into college.⁶⁶

High-stakes testing in India also exemplifies the pressure students face as a result of a single exam. Students feel that a high score on the exam is the only way to obtain a decent job or a place in college.⁶⁷ For many students, success on the exam is also the only way to help their families out of poverty. Thus, the pressure to succeed is great.⁶⁸

The pressure to succeed on tests also highlights another negative effect of high-stakes testing: cheating. When the pressure to achieve a high score is intense, sometimes people resort to wrong-doing. In April 2015, during the exams given in Bihar, India, one of India's poorest states, images showed dozens of relatives scaling the walls of the school building in order to pass cheat sheets through the windows.⁶⁹ One student also admitted to writing mnemonics on her hands while another smuggled notes under his watch and in his socks. Still others turned to the thriving market of cameras hidden in buttons, ties, pens and bras.⁷⁰ Many families are resorting to these measures because they feel they need to do whatever they can to help their child. There is intense competition for jobs where the only qualification that counts is the score on an exam. For example, in 2013, when the State Bank of India advertised 1,500 menial vacancies, it received more than 17 million applications.⁷¹ Unfortunately, India's educational system may have led to the problem of cheating because many of the schools are underfunded and overcrowded.⁷² Further, the schools fail to provide students with a strong educational foundation. A survey published by the Indian research group Pratham found that half of 570,000 students were not able to read simple sentences or solve basic arithmetic after six years of schooling.⁷³ According to Arjun Dev, "the system has failed students. It doesn't equip them with the necessary qualifications and then overplays the importance of exams, whose certificate is hailed as the ultimate ticket to success."⁷⁴

India is not the only country recently involved in a large cheating scandal. In October 2014, the Educational Testing Service, the non-profit that runs the SAT, announced that it was withholding the scores of students who took that month's administration of the exam in China

⁶⁵ *Id.*

⁶⁶ *Id.*

⁶⁷ Annie Banerji, *Under pressure, India's students turn to cheating*, NEWS.YAHOO.COM, (May 2, 2015, 11:39 pm) <http://news.yahoo.com/ynder-pressure-indias-students-turn-cheating-033928469.html>.

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ *Id.*

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ Amrit Dhillon, *In India, exam cheating is just a symptom*, THEGLOBEANDMAIL.COM (March 30, 2015, 3:00 am EDT) <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/in-india-exam-cheating-is-just-a-symptom/article23669759/?cmpid=rss1>.

⁷² Banerji, *supra*.

⁷³ *Id.*

⁷⁴ *Id.*

and South Korea due to allegations of cheating.⁷⁵ Due to the intense pressure to succeed and the difficulty in attaining a spot in a top Chinese university, students wanted to excel on the SAT as a way to gain access to top US universities under the belief that “an elite US education opens doors around the world”.⁷⁶ Unfortunately, there are other stories of cheating in China. In the fall of 2014, some 2,440 pharmacy students were caught in a sophisticated cheating scheme that involved the use of wireless earpieces and “electronic erasers” to transmit information to test-takers.⁷⁷ In 2013, a riot ensued over the *gaokao* in Zhongxiang, a city in the Hubei province. Since the town had a reputation for scores that were “suspiciously good”, officials brought in nonlocal proctors for the exam. Outraged, more than 2,000 people, mostly parents, trapped investigators inside the exam hall crying, “It’s not fair unless we cheat.”⁷⁸ Thus, parents felt that cheating was the only way to give their children an equal chance at success.

In addition to students and parents feeling the pressure to attain high-scores on high-stakes tests, educators feel that pressure as well. Unfortunately, this may lead some teachers to cheat on exams. In 2013, 35 educators in Atlanta were indicted in a huge cheating scandal. They were accused of taking part in efforts to “raise scores at struggling schools by erasing wrong answers and putting in correct answers”.⁷⁹ More than 20 of the educators took a plea deal and twelve others went on trial. On April 14, 2015, a judge sentenced 3 of the educators to 7 years in prison, later reducing the sentence to 3 years.⁸⁰ Additionally, the 8 teachers and administrators sentenced all received some jail time.⁸¹ According to Allie McCullen of Rise Up Georgia, “Jail time for these educators is not addressing the high-stakes culture.”⁸² “The basics of the case - educators being told to show results, or else – are an example of why our current education reform bureaucracy, not the educators, should have been on trial.”⁸³ Michael Bowers, a former Georgia attorney general who investigated the case, noted that there were “cheating parties” and that the teachers were told to make changes to the answers on tests. Further, he heard that the educators cheated “out of pride, to earn bonuses, to enhance their careers or to keep their jobs.”⁸⁴ According to McCullen, while the cheating was certainly wrong, the teachers’ actions were the result of the high-stakes culture that does not allow low-income students access to the same resources of higher performing schools in wealthy districts. With

⁷⁵ Rauhala, *supra*, at 38.

⁷⁶ *Id.*

⁷⁷ *Id.* at 39.

⁷⁸ *Id.*

⁷⁹ Ralph Ellis and Elwyn Lopez, *Judge reduces sentences for 3 educators in Atlanta cheating scandal*, CNN.COM, (April 30, 2015, 11:39 pm ET) <http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/30/us/atlanta-schools-cheating-scandal/index.html>.

⁸⁰ *Id.*

⁸¹ *Id.*

⁸² Joseph Williams, *Why Jailing Cheating Teachers Probably Won't Help America's Kids*, NEW.YAHOO.COM, (April 16, 2015, 5:54 pm) <http://news.yahoo.com/why-jailing-cheating-teachers-probably-won-t-help-21548792.html>.

⁸³ *Id.*

⁸⁴ Ellis et al., *supra*.

concerns that the school might close if scores did not improve, the teachers were concerned that their students would be left behind.⁸⁵

In addition to the impacts on teachers and parents, another important negative effect of high-stakes standardized testing is the emotional impact on the students themselves. For some students, the stress of exams causes them to have difficulty sleeping and becoming sick to their stomachs. For others, the exams cause them not to want to go to school.⁸⁶ Some students hear about tests they will have to take when they are older and as a result, they worry at a young age about them. For example, one 5 year old expressed his concern to his father over a test that he would have to take in 3rd grade.⁸⁷ Some students have created special rituals to help them deal with the emotional toll. In Taiwan, for example, students taking college entrance exams pray to special exam gods.⁸⁸ In Japan, students place their hopes for success on college entrance exams on wooden plaques that are hung in shrines.⁸⁹ While some students may see the tests as an opportunity to advance or improve their lives thus, they are instilled with great motivation to study harder and do well. However, for other students, the high-stakes test presents a huge obstacle for their success, thereby curtailing their motivation to perform well.⁹⁰ Current CTU President, Karen Lewis, discussed a time when she was a teacher and administered a standardized test that came with the curriculum.⁹¹ The white boys in the class all did very well, but one very bright African-American girl did not do well and was devastated by her results. “She internalized the scores as somehow reflective of her value and potential.”⁹²

In addition to the emotional impact on students, the focus on performing well on high-stakes tests also diminishes the students’ voice in their education. Set curriculum and test-prep materials do not allow students to share knowledge of themselves and what is important to them. As Paulo Freire suggests, education should not follow a “banking” model where only teachers give information and students are merely “receptacles” to be “filled”.⁹³ Instead, he posits that education should have more integration of the student’s own knowledge so they can become “beings for themselves.”⁹⁴ Thus, the model of students simply memorizing facts given by a teacher is replaced with the dialogue of shared knowledge as teachers and students become “teacher-student” and “student-teachers”.⁹⁵

⁸⁵ Williams, *supra*.

⁸⁶ MADAUS ET AL., *supra*, at 4.

⁸⁷ *Id.*

⁸⁸ *Id.* at 161.

⁸⁹ Turner, *supra*.

⁹⁰ MADAUS ET AL., *supra*, at 160.

⁹¹ Karen Lewis, *Testing Nightmares in MORE THAN A SCORE: THE NEW UPRISING AGAINST HIGH-STAKES TESTING* 77, 82 (Jesse Hagopian ed., Haymarket Books, 2014).

⁹² *Id.*

⁹³ PAULO FREIRE, *PEDAGOGY OF THE OPPRESSED*, 72 (Myra Berman Ramos trans., Continuum International Publishing Group 2000) (1971, 1993).

⁹⁴ *Id.* at 74.

⁹⁵ *Id.* at 80.

The constant focus on high-stakes testing also affects the way students view the role of their education. Malcolm London expressed his feelings in an excerpt from his poem “Multiple Choice”⁹⁶:

i’ve assumed every problem must have a multiple choice solution
every year since third grade my future has been led
by the tip of a number two pencil shading in
alphabetized answers on a Scantron
to determine what class I might end up in,
by inhaling test-prep booklets
commanding me to “concentrate,”
“be patient, careful, to choose the correct solution”
or eliminate “answers you know are wrong”
and since third grade it seems Chicago has choked
on all of the above
except the *process of elimination*.⁹⁷

A student, Amber Kudla, vented her anger at the over-use of standardized testing and its ultimate usefulness as part of her high-school valedictory address⁹⁸:

“As for the argument that the assessments are challenging our students more, sure that’s true. It’s a challenge to fit the same amount of material into one year with more exams. It’s a challenge to memorize loads of facts in time for the next test. It’s also a challenge to eat a teaspoon of cinnamon in one bite without choking but what are you really accomplishing?”⁹⁹

Although high-stakes testing presents students with many negative effects, for Hagopian, one is particularly troublesome. “Perhaps the most menacing aspect of high-stakes testing is the

⁹⁶ Malcolm London and Falmata Seid, *Poems in MORE THAN A SCORE: THE NEW UPRISING AGAINST HIGH-STAKES TESTING* 161, 164 (Jesse Hagopian ed., Haymarket Books, 2014).

⁹⁷ *Id.*

⁹⁸ Amber Kudla, *518-455-4767 in MORE THAN A SCORE: THE NEW UPRISING AGAINST HIGH-STAKES TESTING* 141,144 (Jesse Hagopian ed., Haymarket Books, 2014).

⁹⁹ *Id.*

way it disfigures our society by training people to live in fear of making mistakes.”¹⁰⁰ Unfortunately, people grow by learning from mistakes and if students are taught that mistakes are unacceptable, they cannot experience the tremendous breakthroughs that come from them.

While high-stakes testing cannot be eliminated in all situations, there are some possible alternatives that may lessen the negative effects of standardized tests. One option is for teachers to use performance-based assessments.¹⁰¹ This type of assessment challenges students to explain their ideas around issues that are explored in the classroom. It also would include a portfolio of the students work over a period of time, thus providing a more complete picture of the student’s knowledge. Therefore, this type of assessment also allows the student to develop both creativity and critical thinking skills.¹⁰² Another option is to utilize more teacher made assessments that would draw on the vast knowledge of teachers in designing both lessons and assessments. Finally, teachers in Seattle, who formed the Teacher Work Group on Assessment, developed guidelines called the “Markers of Quality Assessment” which help define the attributes of authentic assessments that could be used as alternatives to standardized testing.¹⁰³ These include assessments that: reflect actual student knowledge; are free of gender, class, and racial bias; are not just test-taking skills; and are educational in and of themselves.¹⁰⁴

High-stakes standardized testing unfortunately leads to many negative effects that impact students, parent, teachers, and the educational system. While standardized tests proliferate the educational system for both younger and older students, they often do not tell the whole story of what a student knows and is able to do. Unfortunately, the constant emphasis on these tests also detracts from the learning that is possible. Until high-stakes testing is seen as only a small portion of a student’s educational life, they will continue to cause multiple negative effects. As William Ayers states, “Standardized tests can’t measure initiative, creativity, imagination, conceptual thinking, curiosity, effort, irony, judgment, commitment, nuance, goodwill, ethical reflection, or a host of other valuable dispositions and attributes. What they can measure and count are isolated skills, specific facts and functions, the least interesting and least significant aspects of learning.”¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁰ Hagopian, *Preface*, *supra*, at 25.

¹⁰¹ *Id.* at 17.

¹⁰² *Id.*

¹⁰³ *Id.* at 16.

¹⁰⁴ *Id.*

¹⁰⁵ Kohn, *supra*, at 17.