

Are STANDARDIZED TESTS Being Used Appropriately?



A prominent newspaper recently reported that a principal in Montgomery County, Maryland, was forced to resign because of improper use of a standardized test. It appears that pressure from parents and others for higher scores was the motivation behind the misuse.

Standardized tests are currently being used in many American schools as the sole or major criterion to determine a child's academic standing, as well as the level at which he or she should be placed in school. The news media (television and newspapers) use standardized test scores to rate the academic excellence of schools and school districts. Test scores for nearby schools are even used as a factor in real-estate prices! Teachers fear for their jobs because their ability to teach is being questioned solely on the basis of low test scores.

Questions About Standardized Tests

Educational journals and newsletters regularly report standardized scores by race, with Caucasians and Asians getting the top scores, and Hispanics and African-Americans scoring at the bottom. This made me wonder: Is there a valid reason to compare students by race? Should students be required to state their race on the standardized test?¹ Why do certain groups score better than others on these tests? Should standardized tests be the sole criterion in determining whether students are academically successful or have a high aptitude? How much weight should such tests be given in decisions about scholarships and college entrance?

Miner and Swope² argue that standardized tests stifle creativity and reduce the quality and

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By Carol H. Hammond

quantity of what is being taught and learned. Such tests also result in a disproportionate number of failures among students of color and low income.

Problems With Standardized and High-Stakes Tests

In addition to standardized tests, many states in the U.S. are imposing high-stakes tests on students in several grades, culminating in a required test for graduation from high school. Like most of the standardized tests, these exams have been criticized for a variety of reasons. Critics allege that:

- The tests encourage teachers to

“teach to the test” and/or to use unethical methods to raise student scores.

- Standardized tests bear little resemblance to the curriculum in most schools, so they are therefore not only unfair to students who have not been exposed to the material being tested, but also constitute a poor measure of the quality of teaching or learning.

- The tests are biased, since certain groups (African-Americans, Hispanics, low-income children, recent immigrants, students for whom English is a second language) regularly score lower than others on the exams.

- The tests favor students with specific skills and learning styles. Students with learning disabilities, those whose aptitude lies outside the linguistic and logical-mathematical areas, and persons whose thinking is comprehensive and divergent are at a disadvantage in taking standardized tests.³

- Standardized tests measure only students’ ability to recall unrelated facts and do not require or measure critical thinking skills.

- The tests have little relationship to the skills needed for real life.

- Standardized tests do not measure the goals and objectives of Adventist education; and they do not sample the full spectrum of students’ abilities.⁴

If all or even some of these allegations are true, why do schools administer standardized and high-stakes tests? In general, because they are required to do so, and because of the demand for “educational accountability” and “raising teaching standards.” *Accountability*, the new buzzword, often means little more than holding teachers and students responsible for scores on standardized tests.

Tests Overemphasized

The assumption is that the more testing, the more academic standards will go up! (A similar analogy from the healthcare arena: The more times you take a patient’s temperature, the faster he will recover.) What is happening instead is that academic standards are weakened as tests become the focal point of the curriculum. Since standardized and high-stakes tests are rarely based on what is taught in current textbooks, teachers often spend weeks or months preparing students to take the tests.⁵

Meanwhile, subjects not included on the standardized tests are ignored or neglected. In Adventist schools, this is of special concern, since standardized tests do not measure Bible knowledge or moral development.

Kohn⁶ says that standardized tests are the means utilized by officials to



impose their will on schools. He also believes that we are destroying schools by choking creativity and forcing teachers to teach to the tests.

How Well Do Standardized Tests and GPAs Correlate?

Because of concerns like these, I set out to determine if the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) correlated with academic success (as measured by grades and teacher observations) for children of African descent who have demonstrated their success through high grade-point averages (GPAs) of 2.50-4.10. (In the American system, a GPA of 4.0 indicates an A, 3.0 is a B, 2.0 is a C, etc.) The sample consisted of 105 students in grades 5-8 from two Adventist elementary schools in Maryland.⁷

The results of this study indicated that only three of the subtests correlated with levels of academic success for these students: Language Grade Equivalent, Language National Percentile Rank, and Math National Stanine. The Language Grade Equivalent scores resulted in a negative correlation (*beta*)—that is, the higher the Language Grade Equivalent scores, the lower the GPA! Because of these results, I performed further analysis on the survey results, only to find that there were students with GPAs as low as 2.50 who had standardized test scores in the 80th and 90th percentiles (the maximum percentile is 100)!

Further investigation revealed that the students whose test scores ranked in the highest percentiles had been attending the same school since kindergarten and had taken the standardized tests repeatedly (six to seven times). The highest GPA (4.10) in the study did not correlate with the student's scores on the Iowa Tests of Basic Skills, which fell in the 60th and 70th percentiles on some of the subtests. Looking further into this student's background, we discovered she had attended the school for only two years and had not taken the test at her previous school.

Should standardized tests be the sole criterion in determining whether students are academically successful or have a high aptitude? How much weight should such tests be given in decisions about scholarships and college entrance?

This experience led me to conclude that familiarity with standardized tests affects performance. It was clear that students who had taken the ITBS repeatedly over the years performed better than those who had taken the test two times or less.

The most startling findings of the study: (1) Familiarity with standardized tests affects performance on these tests. (2) Only one math and one language score correlated with academic success levels for this group of students. Reading scores on the tests, which are generally thought to be highly correlated with academic success, bore no relationship to these students' GPAs.

So, do standardized tests have any predictive value? Are they just a

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means of sorting and comparing groups of children? Or can they serve a useful purpose if used correctly?

How to Use Standardized Tests

Guidelines included with the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) indicate exactly how the test should be used:

1. To determine the developmental level of each student so that teachers can adapt instruc-

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tions to individual needs and abilities.

2. To diagnose strengths and weaknesses in the pupil's educational development.

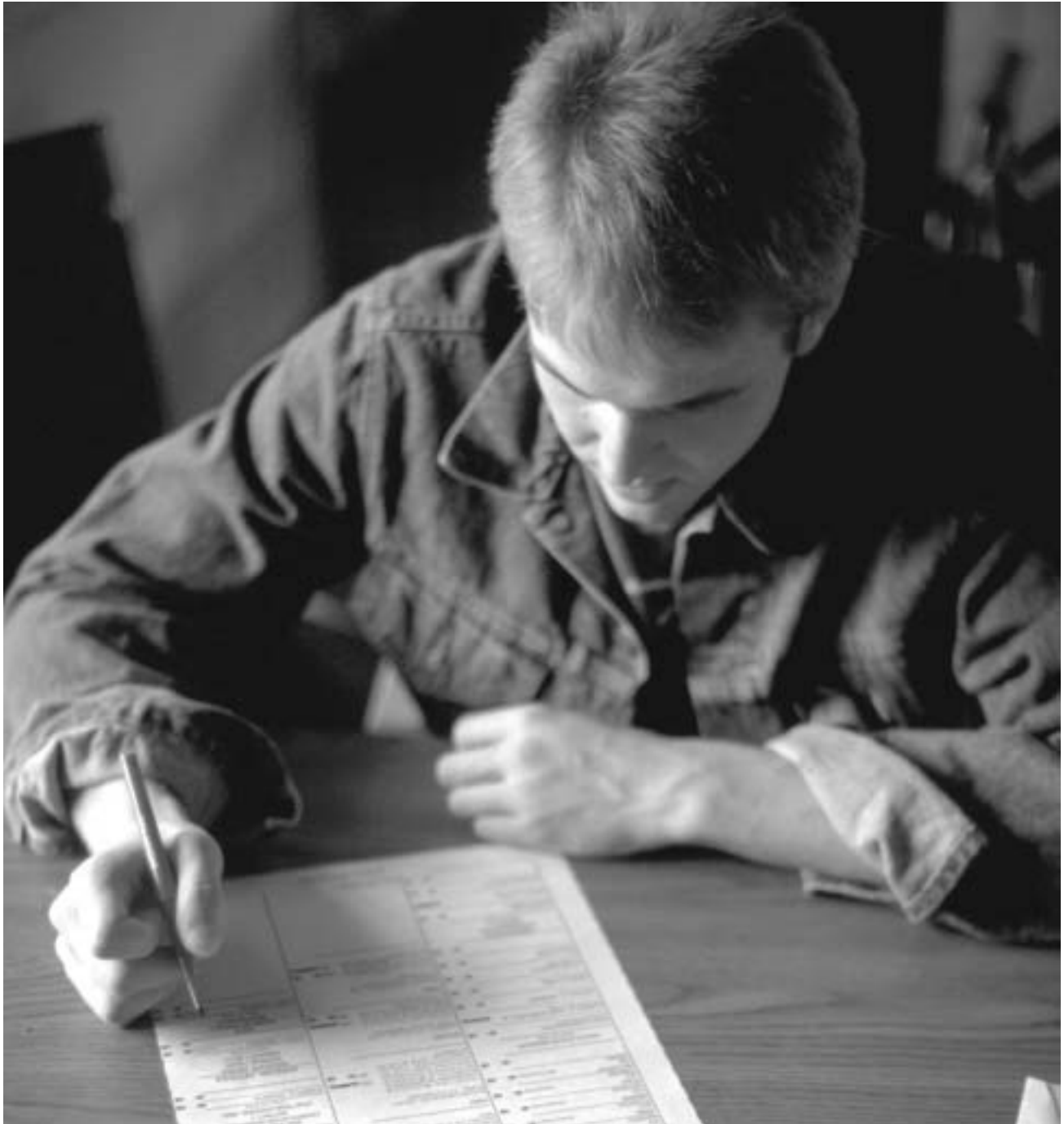
3. To determine the student's

readiness skills to begin instruction.

4. To provide progress reports to parents.⁸

The instructions also describe some inappropriate usages of the tests:

1. Denying students entrance into school based solely on the scores from standardized tests. Promoting students based solely



on the scores of these tests.

2. Comparing students with other students and schools with other schools with the purpose of determining who is academically successful and who is not.⁹

The manual clearly states that the sole purpose of the ITBS is to improve instruction. Consequently, teachers should not be castigated or replaced because of low test scores. Instead, administrators should provide them with in-service sessions that discuss the areas where the students are weak and suggest appropriate strategies to help bring up the scores. Administrators should make sure parents understand the meaning of standardized test scores—that they are only one measure of academic success.

Some students lack good test-taking skills and experience test anxiety. If passing the test is important to their academic standing, they should receive tutoring on both skills and content to help them perform well on the tests. See the sidebar on page 26 for suggestions on helping students become savvy test-takers.

The ITBS manual also states that standardized test scores should not replace the teacher's judgment regarding the academic success and aptitude of students. Today, it would appear that, in many schools, the teachers' competence and skills are

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being questioned, and other measures of student success, such as grades, are being replaced by standardized test scores. Teachers are being harshly judged when pupils do poorly on standardized tests, even when the students' work is deemed satisfactory by other measures of evaluation.

According to Chase, when standardized tests are used to make decisions concerning student promotion

or retention, such tests should carry the least weight and other factors such as teacher observations and student maturity levels and attitude should carry more weight.¹⁰

A further concern, alluded to earlier in this article, is whether classroom instruction correlates with what is being measured by standardized tests. Schools and school districts should use care in choosing which standardized tests to use. They need to ensure that there is a good match between their curriculum and what is being tested. It is unfair to expect students to recall information they have never been taught.

Some things to think about when choosing and administering a standardized test:

- Since a single standardized test cannot provide a complete picture of any student's academic aptitude or progress, the school needs to combine such tests with other methods of evaluation (grades, teacher evaluations, etc.) to obtain a balanced picture of each child.

- Have any studies been done to correlate the school's curriculum with what is being measured by the standardized tests?

- Since there is no such thing as a culture-free test, students from certain backgrounds may score poorly on standardized tests, despite good aptitude and skills.

- Have teachers received instruction in how to help students succeed on standardized tests?

- Is an excessive amount of time being devoted to testing? Has this caused teachers to neglect the subjects that do not appear on the standardized tests?

- Are teachers under so much pressure to produce high test scores that they are tempted to "teach to the test"?

- Have teachers and administrators explained the appropriate uses and limitations of standardized tests to parents and school board members?

Kohn¹¹ states that norm-refer-

The U.S. Public Looks at Standardized Tests

According to the 35th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll of the Public's Attitude Toward U.S. Public Schools, reported in the September 2003 *Phi Delta Kappan*:

- 66 percent of people responding to the poll believed that no single test provided a fair assessment of whether a school needed improvement;
- 72 percent believed that it was impossible to accurately judge a student's proficiency in English and math on the basis of a single test;
- 67 percent believed that students enrolled in special education should not be required to meet the same standards as other students in the school,
- 66 percent believed that the current emphasis on standardized tests will encourage teachers to "teach to the test," rather than teaching the subject
- 60 percent believed that "teaching to the test" was a bad thing to do.

[Kohn] believes that we are destroying schools by choking creativity and forcing teachers to teach to the tests.

enced tests such as the Iowa Test of Basic Skills have as their objective to determine who is beating whom and not to measure how well a student is learning. The tests are designed so that knowledge gained outside the classroom provides a big advantage. Consequently, students whose parents are affluent and well educated, have computers, take them on interesting trips, and provide a print-rich home environment have a decisive advantage.

Kohn also indicates that test designers typically discard a question in which African-Americans would do well and whites would not.¹² Other researchers have stated that standardized tests intentionally exaggerate differences between students. For example, questions answered correctly by the “better” examinees are considered good questions. Items answered correctly mainly by the lower-scoring students are discarded as invalid.¹³ These are examples of the kind of bias that is built into standardized tests.

People who point to standardized

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Helping Students Overcome Test Anxiety

Test anxiety is a significant problem for many students. Teachers can help reduce students’ fear of standardized tests by taking the following steps:

1. Give students a pep talk, reassuring them of your confidence in their skills and commitment to succeed.
2. Bring in counselors with whom students can share their anxiety and who can lead out in deep breathing exercises. (If this is not feasible, you can help the children visualize themselves doing well on the tests, and teach them how to relax. Alternating testing with vigorous exercise and reminding students to eat a healthful breakfast the morning of the test will help, too.)
3. Prepare students for the test by using fun-filled games such as *Jeopardy*.
4. Pray with your students.

test scores as a measure of innate intelligence and “quality schools” would do well to consider that 80 percent of the factors determining who makes the dean’s list as compared to those on academic probation come from sources not measured by the SAT.¹⁴ Unfortunately, the public often assumes that standardized tests are objective, accurate measures of teaching and learning. Furthermore, the public has been led to believe that all students should be taught the same way and be tested on the same things. Many U.S. states are rethinking



their high-stakes testing requirements. Some have upped the number of chances students have to pass the tests, and many are trying to make sure that the tests reflect what is being taught. Others are offering tutoring for students with special needs and those who are considered to be at high risk for failure.

Conclusion

There is no scientific evidence that standardized testing and accountability will improve student achievement. Real accountability for teachers should be based on their effect on the lives of students. Chase¹⁵ says that parents and teachers need to join together to put standardized testing in its proper place. A growing number of parents and teachers feel that too much emphasis is being placed on tests and that too much time is being devoted to standardized testing. In some places, parents are refusing to allow their children to take the tests.

Although teachers may be able to improve test scores through drills, test preparation, and teaching to the test, the price they pay will be the deemphasizing of subjects not taught on the tests (including Bible), less time allotted for creative projects, as well as a curriculum that emphasizes rote learning of facts in order to produce

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higher test scores, rather than teaching students to be thinkers and not mere reflectors of other people's thoughts.¹⁶

How can teachers, administrators, and other educators make sure that standardized tests are being used appropriately?

First, and most important, make sure that test scores are used solely to improve teacher instruction.

Second, insist that standardized tests correlate with the curriculum being taught in schools.

Third, do not require students to state their race on the test, since this is not a factor that should be considered and is an inappropriate use of the test.

Finally, keep in mind that many vital skills and concepts are not included in standardized tests, but need to be taught in order to ensure a wholistic and balanced education—for example, science, Bible, art, music, and physical education should not be shortchanged by overemphasizing the limited areas covered by standardized and high-stakes tests. ✍



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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. This suggests additional questions about how race is defined and what choices are offered on the test forms. Today, many people are reluctant to identify themselves as belonging to a particular race, and many are of mixed race. Also, the meaning of ethnicity is ambiguous—Hispanics/Latinos share a language, but not necessarily racial characteristics. They may be of European, African, or native background. Many tests demand that takers select one box for race, which may be too limiting, not to mention inaccurate.
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11. Alfie Kohn, "Poor Teaching for Poor Kids," *Language Arts* 79:3 (2002), pp. 251-254.
12. Ibid.
13. Kea, p. 20.
14. Gerald Bracey, "Test Scores in the Long Run," *Pbi Delta Kappan* 83:8 (2001), pp. 637, 638.
15. Chase.
16. Ellen G. White, *Education* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1903), p. 17.