

REVIEW OF: TESTING, TESTING, TESTING

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I have been asked to comment upon a perfectly dreadful treatise called Testing, Testing, Testing. This publication was sponsored by the American Association of School Administrators, the Council of Chief State School Officials and the National Association of Secondary School Principals, all departments of the National Education Association.

Incidentally, the Joint Committee on Testing of these prodigious sounding organizations is composed entirely of school administrators and professors of education; not one psychologist or psychometrician is a member of the testing committee. Consequently, the report which I am reviewing is the work of administrators alone. They had no assistance in the preparation of this monstrosity.

This portentous little booklet is a marvelous example of a bureaucratic effort to bludgeon and eliminate any kind of a national testing program. Conspicuously absent from the booklet is any intellectual analysis of the value of national testing. The product is a blind, blanket condemnation of testing. I raise the question, with utmost sincerity, that the sponsoring organizations, all administrators, might be afraid of what national test data reveal about the status of education.

Not only is this distressing little booklet, which is aimed at eliminating national testing programs, an example of uninformed but highly vested interests, it is also a travesty of nonintellectuality.

One would expect a booklet sponsored by organizations with such awesome sounding names to be at least grammatically correct. Alas! I have some bad news for you. Throughout the booklet, in most places, the words "secondary school" are hyphenated, but in some places, the words "secondary school" are not hyphenated. In places, the absence of erudition is even more obvious as the authors hyphenate the words "high school," and in other places these words are not hyphenated. The entire booklet is a crass exhibition of unscholarly writing. There are literally dozens of hyphenated words which can be written only as two separate words.

I would like to hypothesize that apparently no one from the National Association of Secondary School Principals, one of the sponsors, even read the booklet before it was published. I make this remark because the booklet refers to the position of principal as a "building principal," as if he were some kind of a super janitor of the building but without community responsibility or obligation to the learning process. If you really want to get a principal's dander up, just call him a "building principal." Yet, this grievous publication, sponsored by the principal's association, does precisely that.

I would like to quote several excerpts from this dismal little publication in order to illustrate the kind of proposition which it advocates:

Although some teachers can ignore the ominous and ever-present shadow of external tests, we must assume that most classroom teachers feel the impact.

The booklet fails to tell us how the teacher is affected by this hovering shadow. Just as a manufacturer of toothpaste attempts to infer that all nonusers of its product suffer from halitosis, Testing, Testing, Testing implies that schools which use nationally standardized tests are courting some formidable but subtly sinister disaster.

Here is another little gem:

Success can be predicted to a certain extent, depending on what is meant by success.

What a platitude! The entire booklet is filled with hackneyed stereotyped cliches such as this. Another example of the hundreds of misstatements is the comment that:

The aura of infallibility surrounding standardized test is troublesome.

There is no aura of infallibility surrounding standardized test; no competent guidance counselor or school teacher considers standardized test as "infallible."

Taking tests costs money. This is one more item that adds weight to the observation that public education is not as free to the pupils and parents as many persons assume it to be.

To the best of my knowledge, no school requires students to take tests for which they must pay. There is a fee for certain national tests which are taken voluntarily, and this is as it should be.

If school administrators sponsoring this ghastly publication were seriously and honestly interested in making education free to every child, then they would oppose some of the really nefarious practices which are going on in schools all across the country. I am talking here about the "deals" in which schools arrange for commercial photographers to come in and take "School Days" pictures of all the students and then overcharge the students in order that a profit of from 25% to 40% can be kicked back to the schools. This unprofessional practice is carried on in practically every elementary and secondary school in Florida as well as in most of the nation's schools. I haven't seen any bulletins sponsored by AAAS etc. entitled "Picture Taking, Picture Taking, Picture Taking."

Perhaps the most ridiculous charge of all is this one:

The standardized test is an impersonal instrument.

Well, we need impersonal instruments if we are ever to have objective evaluations as to what students have learned.

Now, let's look at what's really bothering the National Association of School Administrators, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the National Association of Secondary School Principals.

About two years ago a new national testing program was developed called the American College Testing Program. This organization which was centered at the University of Iowa spread its representatives across the nation by employing state testing coordinators to push their program along with the state program. The worst offense was at the University of Illinois where the coordinator of the Illinois State Testing Program is still on the American College Testing Program payroll. This happened also in Florida, and I forget whether it was someone from the Florida State University Testing Service or the Registrar's office of the University of Florida, but the initial literature from ACTP

recorded one of these individuals as their state coordinator. This was a violation of professional ethics and certainly deserved condemnation. The second irritation is the National Merit Scholarship Program which publishes its test results and circulates them among national news media. Subsequently, the news media rate schools on the basis of how their students perform on the National Merit Examinations. Instead of having the courage to tangle directly with these two powerful organizations and point the finger of guilt at their unprofessionalism, these overgrown and overwrought organizations publish an entire booklet full of inaccuracies, full of blandness, and against the idea of testing. If National Merit were as interested in the individual as it is in publicity, then it would report the results of its tests only to the school instead of directing it to the press. If these administrative organizations of the NEA were viable organizations, then they would require that this be done. The problem is that simple.

The school administrators sponsoring this booklet show a shocking lack of understanding of the role of a teacher. Let me read you their description of the teacher's role:

Teachers are theoretically committed to nurturing the personal growth of pupils--growth in creativity, and in developing understanding of all phenomena in depth.

I would like to see just one teacher who is capable of understanding all phenomena in depth, much less teaching students to understand all phenomena in depth.

Another priceless sentence from this insufferable little booklet says:

There are some communities where teachers are evaluated by the records made by their pupils on external tests.

If administrators evaluate their teachers on the basis of scores which students make on tests, I fail to see how this is the fault of the tests. This is their own foolish fault. (I told you in the beginning that this was an unintelligent little booklet.) It would be more appropriate if they wrote a booklet entitled "Administravia, Administravia, Administravia."

Another shocking statement showing lack of insight into the educational process is this comment:

The function and goals of the American secondary school clearly are not the same as those of higher education.

If the function of the secondary school is different from the function of higher education, then something is seriously amiss with either the high school or college. Both of these institutions should be committed to the objective of cultivating the mind.

Now, let's look at some of the reasons why national standardized tests are significant. The major factor is that the marks which teachers give students are completely unreliable. Teacher evaluation is only an event at best and no real criterion at all.

To point up the inaccuracy of marking we need only to look at rudimentary research which shows that women teachers give higher marks to girl students than to boys. Generally, teachers tend to give higher marks to students from high socio-economic areas and lower marks to those from the lower strata of society.

This is just the beginning of the problem of marking. The average high school teacher teaches one hundred fifty students a day. Under our present marking system, she is required to evaluate each youngster every six to nine weeks on the basis of both his knowledge of the subject and his citizenship! She is supposed to be honest and fair in this assessment. In addition, she is expected to spend man hours outside of school planning her lessons. Under hectic circumstances of too many students and too many teaching periods, about the best that the teacher can do is to give a rough estimate of the student's achievement and citizenship.

There is even a great deal of doubt as to whether teachers are competent to construct adequate examinations which usually comprise about twenty-five per cent of the final mark that the student receives. Bruner focuses on this concern as he points up the need for better examinations. This is what Bruner says on the subject:

A word is needed, finally, on examinations. It is obvious that an examination can be bad in the sense of emphasizing trivial aspects of the subject. Such examinations can encourage teaching in a disconnected fashion and learning by

rote. What is often overlooked, however, is that examinations can also be allies in the battle to improve curricula and teaching. Whether an examination is of the "objective" type involving multiple choices or of the essay type, it can be devised so as to emphasize an understanding of the broad principles of a subject. Indeed, even when one examines on detailed knowledge, it can be done in such a way as to require an understanding by the student of the connectedness between specific facts. There is a concerted effort now underway among national testing organizations, like Educational Testing Service, to construct examinations that will emphasize an understanding of fundamental principles. Such efforts can be of great help. Additional help might be given to local school systems by making available to them manuals that describe the variety of ways in which examinations can be constructed. The searching examination is not easy to make, and a thoughtful manual on the subject would be welcome.

Small wonder that no respectable college today will accept a student on the basis of marks given in high school. The new standard for the college bound student is the scholastic aptitude score of the College Entrance Examination Board. Even state universities, which have traditionally been open to anyone with a high school diploma, are now requiring either a state-administered test or the College Board Scholastic Aptitude Test.

Instead of less testing we need more standardized testing as we step up the pace of education. How can we know where we are going unless we objectively evaluate what students have learned?

In the interest of honestly informing parents where the youngster stands and how he compares with other students, these A B C D F reports, which are issued periodically for the average and above-average students, should be augmented by a more objective analysis than the teacher is capable of making. The reporting process needs a new dimension. We should eliminate final examinations composed by teachers and administer nationally standardized achievement tests in their place. Student's scores on these tests should be reported to parents at the end of each semester.

The importance of achievement test ranking as a measure of performance can hardly be overestimated. Achievement test results showing precisely how the student compares with other students should

be reported to parents on a newly patterned, but highly explanatory report card which should be issued at the end of each semester. It would constitute a much more honest type of report than the one currently used in the graded schools. Under the present conventional system, the parent never gets an achievement test score, and never really knows how the youngster stands since report cards composed entirely by the teacher are influenced by so many factors that they are highly unreliable. As mentioned previously, conduct and attendance are tangible factors affecting the teacher's marks although they should not be. Among the less tangible but equally influencing factors are the individual's personality, extroversion versus introversion, his social maturity, and his attitude of cooperation. The able student, who is a prickly pear, is almost invariably downgraded by teachers. Another abstraction which cannot be measured is the extent to which the individual teacher uses the report card as a public relations device with the student and the parent.

The need for periodic examinations in achievement harmonizes with the concept of college admission which requires aptitude or achievement tests for admission to college. If the schools will regularly examine the students on the basis of nationally standardized achievement tests and report the scores to parents, then the parent is better prepared for the "Final Judgment" of the College Board examinations which will determine whether, and to what college, the student is acceptable.

One can hardly discuss test questions today without mentioning the contribution of Bloom.

According to Bloom, in his Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, simple recall, spurred by rudimentary questions, is the lowest order of intellectual activity. The more rigorous intellectual activities going up the scale are comprehensive, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

While the use of questions made up by teachers has some learning value, teachers must spend more time in preparing questions. They must pose enigmas which require more than just recall. The stranglehold which simple recall has held in the classroom for centuries must be broken. To a large degree this is done by sophisticated, objectively constructed examinations.

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