

Teaching to the Test

“There has been a profound change in the nature and use of testing in this country”<sup>1</sup>

Take a look at our nation’s schools in 2005. Our schools are overflowing with national and state-wide standardized tests such as the SAT, ACT, AP Exams, NAEP Scores, MCAS and CMT. We live in a test culture where all 50 states have some state-wide test in place; twenty states require students to pass a test in order to receive a diploma and nine states base promotion to the next grade on test results.<sup>2</sup> These tests are greatly affecting our schools and unfortunately, as we are seeing more often, not in a positive way. “‘Teaching to the test’ is a common practice in American schools. The content of the examinations and the educational values and priorities reflected by them tend to become those adopted by the school”<sup>3</sup> But how and when did this practice of “teaching to the test” arise in US schools and to what extent has it altered classroom learning over the past several decades?

The term “teach to the test” first appeared in 1966 in an article in the *New York Times* and since then the number of occurrences of the term has increased drastically. Standardized testing was introduced as a way to accurately measure both student and school progress as well as to establish measures against which to hold schools accountable for results. Federal dollars were being spent on education and the nation wanted some way to assess the quality and accountability of our schools. Now, there are an extensive amount of standardized tests administered, most of which come with serious

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<sup>1</sup> Fiske, Edward B., “America’s Test Mania,” *New York Times* April 10, 1988, p.765

<sup>2</sup> “Assessment”, (<http://www.edweek.org/rc/issues/assessment/?print=1>) (April 12, 2005)

<sup>3</sup> Stevens, William K., “College Board Reform,” *New York Times* November 7, 1970, p.33

consequences for low scores. The increase in testing along with the pressures to perform well has shifted the focus of schools from analysis to multiple-choice.

Through a search of the *New York Times* Historical Archive Database, the earliest use of the term “teaching to the test” was in 1966 in “Report Card for Schools?” an article concerned with the quality of our schools. The *NY Times* is a good indicator of when the term appeared in common language in the United States because it was and still is one of the most reputable newspapers in the nation. The increase in the use of the term since 1966 indicates our nation’s growing concern for what schools are teaching and what students are taking away from the classroom.

The start of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 was the first time that there was an emphasis placed on accountability for results in return for federal dollars issued to state and local schools with low-income students. The purpose of Title I was to “ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging State academic achievement standards and state academic assessments.”<sup>4</sup> With federal dollars being issued to schools, the nation turned to standardized testing as a way to evaluate their quality and give us some idea of where our money was being spent. These standardized assessment systems were part of the push for standards-based school improvement.

The rise in the number of standardized tests reflects the nation’s concern with future generations and the schools that are educating them. Advocates for standardized tests claim that high-stakes tests are a good way to establish and maintain standards for

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<sup>4</sup> “Title I – Improving the Academic Achievement of the Disadvantaged,” (<http://www.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg1.html>), (May 2, 2005)

schools, help motivate students and teachers and work towards achieving educational equity.<sup>5</sup> It is also said that pressure placed on schools to perform well can help raise the quality of low-performing schools. But, curriculum alteration has been found to be correlated with socioeconomic status – the poorer the school (therefore a poorer quality) the more time devoted to test-based instruction. Still, many have continued to argue that some schools are so bad that rote learning and test practice would be an improvement to what they are learning now. Advocates also say that tests can provide information on where students need more help and give educators a better idea of how to improve their classes. However, in a majority of schools, “...the testing explosion may be undermining teacher professionalism, curriculum improvement – and other goals of the school reform movement that produced it.”<sup>6</sup> Not only has the number of standardized tests increased but the number of students taking these tests has increased. For example, when AP tests were first offered only about 1,200 students took them; in 2004 more than 1.1 million high school students took the test.<sup>7</sup> The increase in high-stakes testing and the number of participants has caused an increase in the commonality of “teaching to the test” in the classroom.

The approach implemented to assess the nation’s schools by having students take standardized tests was a good theory, but unfortunately the theory behind the use of such tests has greatly diverged from the practice seen in schools today. In the 1966 article, the implementation of a national assessment was said, “...not to test whether pupils know as much as they should – this would involve a predetermination of what pupils should know

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<sup>5</sup> Catherine Luna; Cara Livingstone Turner, “The Impact of the MCAS: Teachers Talk about High-Stakes Testing,” *The English Journal*, 91 (September 2001), pp. 79-87

<sup>6</sup> Fiske, Edward B., “America’s Test Mania,” *New York Times* April 10, 1988, p.765

<sup>7</sup> Christina A. Samuels, “Advanced Placement Participation Grows,” (<http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2005/02/02/21ap.h24.html>) (April 23, 2004).

– but rather what they do know. The assessment moreover, would not test how well or how poorly individual students, teachers, schools or systems are doing.”<sup>8</sup> Yet only twenty years after this article appeared in the paper, test scores, “...are increasingly being used to promote and hold back students, hire and fire teachers, award diplomas, evaluate curriculums, and dole out money to schools and colleges.”<sup>9</sup> The majority of standardized tests seen today test exactly what the 1966 article says they would not. Since test scores are being evaluated in this way, schools are under enormous pressure to perform because of the risks they face if scores are low.

The article in 1966 pointed out that at that time our nation had no way of assessing the quality of our schools or how much our students knew. But even then there were many critics of a national assessment – all of whose arguments are being echoed by critics of today’s testing craze. “Among the arguments that have been raised against such an assessment are: (1) The test would put ‘ruinous pressure’ upon pupils; (2) the findings would lead to ‘invidious’ comparisons; (3) teachers would ‘teach to the tests’ and neglect important educational objectives; (4) unless Carnegie shows boldness and imagination, the assessment instrument could become ‘a flawed multiple-choice monstrosity’ that ‘will do more harm than good’ and (5) a national assessment program would ultimately force conformity or impose Federal control upon the nations schools.”<sup>10</sup> All of these arguments unfortunately have become the problems that are prominent in our schools today.

As currently used, doing well on these tests plays a major role in determining options a student has in his/her future. “What the test is going to do is even more to

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<sup>8</sup> Buder, Leonard, “Report Card for Schools?” *New York Times* May, 29, 1966, p.E11

<sup>9</sup> Fiske, Edward B., “America’s Test Mania,” *New York Times* April 10, 1988, p.765

<sup>10</sup> Buder, Leonard, “Report Card for Schools?” *New York Times* May, 29, 1966, p.E11

stratify students: Here are the achievers; here are the non-achievers”<sup>11</sup> Pupils are not the only ones who are under pressure, but school districts and teachers are as well. Schools are threatened to lose federal funding, teachers are at risk to lose their jobs, and students are at risk of not advancing to the next grade level and, even in some states, to not receive a diploma. Due to this amount of pressure, administrators and teachers are trying to ensure that schools perform well by making changes within the schools. A concerning number of schools have been altering their curriculums to allow for more time to spend on material found on tests and less time on other subjects, which has essentially forced teachers to “teach to the test”.

It has been found that in a lot of cases test preparation dominates classroom learning from September until March, the average period when standardized tests are administered. It is only after these tests have been taken that other parts of the curriculum can be taught. Teachers from Massachusetts explained why they have modified their curriculum: “to rush to ‘cover’ the entire sophomore curriculum before the May MCAS test date; to make room for more test preparation activities; and to emphasize the specific topics that the test questions address, rather than those topics that might be part of the state curriculum frameworks but that are not covered on the test.”<sup>12</sup> They reported spending more time on topics like literary terms because of their predominance on the test, while also “sacrificing” other topics, like a particular author or novel, because of the time needed to prepare students for the test. Teachers also claim that they are losing much more than just curriculum material with the impact of testing.

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<sup>11</sup> Catherine Luna; Cara Livingstone Turner, “The Impact of the MCAS: Teachers Talk about High-Stakes Testing,” *The English Journal*, 91 (September 2001), pp. 79-87

<sup>12</sup> Catherine Luna; Cara Livingstone Turner, “The Impact of the MCAS: Teachers Talk about High-Stakes Testing,” *The English Journal*, 91 (September 2001), pp. 79-87

Losses reported include, "...curiosity, creativity, inventiveness among students, projects, coverage of supplementary information, and field trips."<sup>13</sup> In Massachusetts, one principal required that final exams be modeled after the MCAS, the state-wide test that is given to all fourth, eighth and tenth graders. The material that students are being tested on has also been a problem. The kinds of material that standardized tests assess are not very complex. "Tests assume a single correct answer to problems. They don't allow for complex answers or multiple ways of arriving at them. They measure how good students are at recognizing information, not generating it. Since [most] tests are timed – even most writing tests – they place more value on thinking quickly than on thinking profoundly."<sup>14</sup> In addition, the federal government has gained much control over the schools through testing. With President Bush's No Child Left Behind Act, all students in grades three through eight must take a standardized test in math and reading. The law also requires state scores to improve or schools will face penalties.

"If these are the educational values standardized tests are fostering – simple answers, low-level skills, quick thinking – it stands to reason that these are the criteria by which Americans wish to judge their schools. But are these really the goals of the reform movement that – in its quest for accountability – inspired the testing boom in the first place?"<sup>15</sup> Some school systems have recognized the problem with testing and have been taking measures to improve it. Michigan, for example, adopted a reading assessment that focused on fewer but longer readings and asked higher-order thinking problems as well. In Massachusetts, aids are provided for students to help them with MCAS preparation.

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<sup>13</sup> Catherine Luna; Cara Livingstone Turner, "The Impact of the MCAS: Teachers Talk about High-Stakes Testing," *The English Journal*, 91 (September 2001), pp. 79-87

<sup>14</sup> Fiske, Edward B., "America's Test Mania," *New York Times* April 10, 1988, p.765

<sup>15</sup> Fiske, Edward B., "America's Test Mania," *New York Times* April 10, 1988, p.765

These aids are things like bookmarks with characteristics of good answers for essay questions or a book cover with open-ended question terms along with definitions.<sup>16</sup> Students should *practice* with prompts from tests, but they should not *learn* how to write according to these prompts. Portfolio assessments have been another alternative to standardized tests. Portfolio assessments are a collection of student work that provide a more in depth look at the student's strengths and weaknesses. Student work could include papers, stories, homework assignments, etc.

While testing is a necessary measure and when used appropriately, can provide insight on the performance of our schools and students, the practice of “teaching to the test” should not exist in classrooms. Tests should reflect what content standards and curriculums mandate. The intent of our nation with the introduction of standardized tests as a means of assessing accountability and quality has not translated into classroom practices. Luckily, our nation is becoming more aware of this problem, and is making some effort to create change for the future.

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<sup>16</sup> Catherine Luna; Cara Livingstone Turner, “The Impact of the MCAS: Teachers Talk about High-Stakes Testing,” *The English Journal*, 91 (September 2001), pp. 79-87

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