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## The Testing Emperor Finally Has No Clothes

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If there's one topic that keeps educational leaders awake at night, and which keeps raising its ugly head when we talk about change in our schools, it's the tyranny of testing.

I don't use the word tyranny lightly. Defined as cruel, unreasonable, or an arbitrary use of power or control through oppressive government rule, I think it does the term justice. What I find most alarming is the pernicious way in which it so rapidly became accepted practice, despite, and almost because of, the lack of reasonable evidence of any significant long-term benefit, or to support the introduction of the standardized testing we have today.

Paradoxically, this is in a sector ruled by "evidence-based practice", here we have the most intrusive, divisive, deceitful policy initiative imaginable and which has little if any research to support its use.

Meanwhile, we now seem to be searching for competitive benchmark heaven, which

has driven educational policymakers to fall in behind the [Cult of Hattie](#) et al. who are fast turning teachers into lab rats as they seek to somehow duplicate the perfect conditions he outlines from his tens of thousands of research studies, all the while ignoring the deceit of standardized testing and the harm it inflicts on both teachers and students.

I think it's about time we exposed some of the chicanery that initiated and sustained this insidious virus in our schools. We are way overdue for the debate around standardized tests to become prominent in the mainstream media led by educational leaders, instead of politicians, journalists or in particular those who benefit most, the testing, tutoring and textbook industry.

So let's start by exposing the absurdity of the assumptions that underpin these tests.

It might come as a shock to some politicians, but learning is not a competitive sport, so how about we stop treating it that way. Why do we persist with ranking everything, naming and shaming schools by publishing test results like they're sporting scores in league tables?

Neither is learning a zero-sum game- as in I learn, you don't, or you learn, I don't. Contrary to the core statistical assumption that standardized tests are built on, we can both learn, and both benefit. So why do we continue to treat learning as if there is only a fixed amount of knowledge that any one person can access at any one time?

Next, we need to be more public and open about the harm that these tests are inflicting on our young people. There have been literally dozens of papers, articles, and books written on the damage and deceit of standardized testing, so take your pick.

We can start with the wealth of evidence to show that testing kills curiosity and motivation, and limits imagination and creativity. As [Ron Maggiano](#) reported in the Washington Post:

*"The overemphasis on testing has led many teachers to eliminate projects and activities that provide students with an opportunity to be creative and imaginative, and scripted curriculum has become the norm in many classrooms."*

John Holt of course, was less subtle:

*"We kill, not only their curiosity, but their feeling that it is a good and admirable thing to be curious, so that by the age of ten most of them will not ask questions, and will show a good deal of scorn for the few who do."*

Then we are faced with the age-old problems of rote memorization nearly always trumping critical thinking in standardized tests. So what has rote recall got to do with being career or college ready in our rapidly changing, knowledge abundant world? The

real irony is that in fact many of the leading tests were never actually intended to measure teaching or learning, and to quote [Alfie Kohn](#), as much as 90 percent of the variations in test scores among schools or states have nothing to do with the quality of instruction.

And if all of that isn't enough, don't forget that one of the hidden curses of standardized testing is the insidious manner in which it penalizes diversity. By statistical definition, it ignores the "edges" which include all of those students who have cultural, geographic physical or intellectual disadvantage. Far from helping to "close the gap," the use of standardized testing has in fact found to be most damaging for low-income and minority students.

Then, of course, we have the problem that we often seem to be testing the wrong things for the wrong reasons...very little of which has any real relationship to student learning, while teaching to the test is so common it's a cliché.

And if all of that isn't enough, now we see tests being used to punish teachers and schools which can, unfortunately, invite cheating, or at least "bending the rules." One simple instance is where a school that improves its test results may well have lowered its standards to do so. Now if you were doing that to simply improve public rankings that's one thing. But critics such as [Diane Ravitch](#) would suggest that it's all part of a battle to use these tests to privatize public schools, in the US in particular.

Finally, despite all the critical feedback from respected educators and academics, many of the tests that students take are designed on poor or plain wrong assumptions, and accordingly many are full of errors. When the highly referenced work of [John Hattie is called into question](#), it shows that how easily we can be blinded by data and statistics.

So that's the real irony. Not only is there little or no evidence that standardized testing "works," but there is considerable evidence to show it not only fails to meet its goals but in doing so does harm to students, teachers, and education systems.

The nett of all of that is an avalanche of tests that have overwhelmed good practice, suffocated teacher innovation and diminished professional respect. As author [Anya Kamenetz](#) outlines:

*"Our nation's test obsession is making American schools into unhappy places. Benchmark, practice, field, and diagnostic exams are raising the total number of standardized tests up to an average of 133 by the 12th grade. Physical education, art, foreign languages, and other vital subjects are going on the block in favor of more drilling on core tested subjects. In one Florida high school, a student reported that her brand-new computer lab was in use 124 days out of the 180-day school year for testing and test prep... In many public schools, students are spending up to 28% of instructional time on testing and test prep."*

So while all this might sound compelling, you still hear the voice of your parents suggesting that the real value of high-stakes testing relates to their child's ability to get into a college or university? Won't we be undermining that opportunity for students if we take away standardized tests?

Let's take a closer look at that question because it's one of the most popular reasons given for testing to continue.

In essence, entry to higher education is built on an antiquated rationing system of their available resources, and while their centuries-old business models may have worked well when information was scarce, today it's abundant and so it's time it changed.

Surely it's about time higher education took a good hard look at itself, and instead of tweaking at the edges with light versions of MOOC's or other online learning courses that mimic the worst of face-to-face pedagogical practice, how about a complete rethink of the further education needs of our students for the modern world?

In the meantime, the reality today is that high test scores are already becoming far less significant in college entry as [Alfie Kohn](#) outlined:

*“Even those unwilling to question the emphasis on college preparation ought to realize that this goal may not require all that is currently done in its name. (SAT) scores often count for less with admissions committees than we think, suggesting an opportunity to rethink those time-consuming, stress-inducing, money-wasting coaching sessions designed to teach tricks for raising scores on a bad test.*

*In fact, about 400 (now 950) colleges and universities, including Bates, Bowdoin, and Mount Holyoke, have stopped requiring the SAT (or ACT) altogether. (See [Fairtest's website](#).)*

One of the most deceitful ironies of the use of high-stakes tests for college entry is that repeatedly they have been shown to not even be effective measures of either Higher Ed or career success. So it is time we looked for more relevant alternatives.

So if we are going to end this tyranny, it's useful to have some background and understand how this testing started, and what has driven its explosive growth. If we look closely, I think it comes down to three simple propositions—a lack of trust, a communications vacuum and the battle of lobbyists vs. learners.

It starts with a **lack of Trust**. The simple facts are that our morbidly obese testing regimes were built on a lack of trust. As my colleague Missy Emler so clearly articulated during one of our [Change School](#) discussions:

*“Look at how much money we spend on educator effectiveness systems because we don't trust teachers. Look at how much we spend on standardized tests because we*

*don't trust grades. Look at how much we spend on lawyers. How can we invest in trust instead of expensing it?"*

Of course, it doesn't have to be this way. Tom Hatch's post about [teaching in Finland](#) is an excellent case in point.

Next, what we had in place from years gone by was a **Communication Vacuum** between school and home, and so school communities were always open to being kept better informed. Traditionally, high school completion rates and college acceptance were seen as two of the more critical measures of a school's performance, as obtuse and imperfect as they were.

But by the time the new century came around, a growing awareness of the rapid changes that were taking place in our world gave rise to concerns around the preparedness of students, which in turn pressed the urgent button in policy and political circles about school effectiveness. In the absence of better alternatives, data and grading would always win the day with parents, which created a perfect climate for high-stakes, competitive standardized tests.

The truth is we should not be surprised by the rapid rise of these tests because this communication vacuum set the perfect conditions for it to happen.

Finally, underpinning all of this is the battle of **Lobbyists vs. Learners**. Once the Pandora's box of an alignment between testing, tutoring, and textbooks had been opened, all hell broke loose, and the commercial opportunities exploded.

If the US testing market alone is [worth \\$1.4 billion](#), then what size market does the coalition have access to worldwide?

The reality of all of this is that the explosive growth in testing has been underwritten by lobbyists representing the testing, textbook and tutoring industries, blindly supported by public media cheering them on from the sidelines. (Well, from the advertising sidelines)

So now that we have the pieces of the puzzle, we have to put them together to be able to tell the true story to politicians, policymakers and above all parents. Our first priority is to spend more time exploring the topic with the wider school community.

It's a simple choice: Lobbyists or learners.

And as the conversation against testing is getting louder, and rapidly gaining traction across the wider community, parents are already looking for better alternatives.

The Testing Emperor has been finally found to have no clothes.

For next steps, I think we need to look no further than to heed the advice of highly

respected educators Deborah Meier and Matthew Knoester, who suggest in their recently released book, [Beyond Testing: Seven Assessments of Students & Schools More Effective Than Standardized Tests](#), that we need to:

*“...puncture a hole in the hegemonic control of schools by standardized tests, but also provide a reasonable proposal for more viable alternatives to the view that standardized tests are the best way to evaluate student knowledge and school success and to provide accountability between schools and their various stakeholders.”*

Combined with this, right now we have more than hundred of the top US schools who have signed up to the new [Mastery Consortium](#), together with more than [nine hundred US colleges and Universities](#) that do not use ACT/SAT scores to admit substantial numbers of students. And it’s happening in other countries at the same time. Change isn’t coming...it’s here.

What we are seeing is an increasing number of a new breed of modern educational leaders who have stopped the tail wagging the dog, and are rejecting the tyranny of testing. They are finally taking control because after all, they are the ones who have responsibility for their students’ learning.

Our modern world demands not only a shift in thinking about credentials at every level, how and when they are awarded but more importantly why. As [Tony Wagner](#) and others have said, in a world of abundance, uncertainty, and exponential change, *it’s not what you know that matters any longer, but rather what you can do with what you know.*

The shift is on, and this new breed of educational leaders are gaining the professional autonomy and **trust** of their state, district, and school communities to rid our schools of the tyranny of testing and set in place alternatives that are built on our beliefs and knowledge of how kids learn. Not before time.

**This article was originally published at [modernlearners.com](#), a site for educational leaders who want to be better informed and make better decisions for modern students. Read more at [www.modernlearners.com](#)**

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**Craig Bentley**  
Music Teacher, Ensemble Director, Music Production Trainer.

16h ...

Thanks Bruce, strong words indeed. I didn't let my son sit the NAPLAN this year (Grade 3), 8 year olds don't need to be formally assessed, they need to be engaged in discovery. Further to which the homework became rehearsal sheets for extra practice & moved away from things like reading together. Hopefully articles like this encourage more parents to act. (edited)

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**Ian Grove-Stephensen**  
Managing Director, Chalkface Project/Yacapaca

10h ...

What confuses me is that the things that we test are not the things we really value. Randomly-selected example: charm. You can't even take a GCSE in it. And if you could? Under the current structure, such a GCSE would demonstrate your ability to write about the history and theory of charm, but it would be no guarantee that you were charming. ...see more

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