

How does standardized testing impact students' motivation to learn?

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A collection of student commentary from StudentsSpeakOut.org

Almost all students participate in some type of standardized tests throughout the school year. While the districts, states, and the federal government require the tests, they are controversial. The students and teachers participating on Students Speak Out expressed their frustration that the tests took away from learning instead of helping the learning process. One student even went the extra step of interviewing a district administrator about standardized testing. Many students argued that teachers spend too much time on test preparation instead of actually teaching the material, creating a monotonous classroom environment and bored students. In this brief, readers will see how students built on each other's ideas in the discussion forums and asked mature questions about the nature of testing.

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "Why do the tests just focus on the basics? Couldn't they survey more and make results more available to people so more people used their results and took them seriously? Not saying I like taking them, but sometimes you just have to do it right? How do we make more students take them seriously, but not overreact?"

Sam (Teacher, Southwest HS) "Another less recognized problem with increased testing is the sheer amount of time it takes. Teachers have short hours to get through what they feel is necessary curriculum in any given subject, and forcing students to take numerous tests can be very disruptive. Further, way back when I was in high school (haha, three years), I remember piloting tests for what I can only assume led to more school funding (anybody else have similar experience?). Teachers would get upset that we were missing class, and students would never really know when we're taking a test that 'counted' or when we were just guinea pigs for something for the future."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "Just brainstorming here, I wonder why they have such weird ways of getting back to the students and their parents about how the student did? Did your teacher ever mention what the purposes of these tests were? I don't think these tests are used to their full potential. If the purpose of most of these is for evaluating basic skill comprehension, then maybe if parents and their kids were more knowledgeable of the scores and how their child performed, the tests could be more valuable to parents as a tool to help notice where their kid(s) are at. Maybe that would help people perform better if they thought the tests were at all important."

Dena (Freshman, Southwest HS) "The MCA's and CALT's are just like these mysterious tests that spread stress throughout the school. We don't know who grades them, how they are graded, or what it is we will be tested on specifically. And even when we get them back, we don't REALLY know how many we got wrong, how we did, or what our actual grade is - they only tell us how we did in comparison to the rest of the students who took the test! It's frustrating to me, and it is not a very accurate way of letting us know how well we did on the test. We only spent a few days doing reviews before the tests in class - not nearly enough time to refresh our memory of EVERYTHING we learned in the ENTIRE YEAR! I think the teachers expect us to learn something in a couple days and be able to remember it in 6 months with only a few minutes refreshing on that topic."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "I think that you have it right. I also think that more testing is not the best thing for students learning when teachers end up having to teach to the test. That does not prepare anyone for the real world. What is a good test score if all it can land you is a good job but not the knowledge to keep it? My current school does not have to teach to the test they try and avoid it and we do a pretty good job on tests. Maybe what is hard also is that teachers do not know what else to do to improve test scores but teach to the tests? Is there a way for testing to not make or break a school so much so teachers do not feel so obligated to teach to the tests? I think somehow a different way to evaluate schools should be in action. What that should be, I am not sure. I think testing is used as kind of the easy way out for judging schools and making decisions about them. I think to get a better overall view about schools and their educating abilities we need to put in a little more effort than sending so many tests for students to take."

Holly (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "I have a different view on standardized testing than most people my age. I'm entering eighth grade, and completed my seventh grade year in a charter school with 30 other students. Prior to that, though, I spent four years (3rd-6th) being home schooled in a very relaxed atmosphere where the education was very self-directed. The only required test I took was the Iowa test- a complete multiple-choice test done once a year. Coming from that, then, into a public school environment where the requirements by teachers and government are much higher, you can imagine how I had to adjust! Taking the MCAII's, several 'just to check on where you are', and those other ones to 'check on where you are NOW' tests were a stark contrast. After completing the tests, I was very glad they were over, but felt no great accomplishment. If they really are aimed to show the teacher where the student is, then shouldn't they also be aimed to see where the teacher is? I don't believe one letter in the alphabets start can dictate whether or not a student is capable of learning. Tests and grades should be guides for teachers, parents, students, and elected government officials in charge of the national education. I know my ABC's, I just want to know the material, as well."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "... I think most of what we learned was how to be good test takers since no matter what we do now and where we go, we will always have to face some kind of test to get in or show our abilities... At my old district school we prepared the whole year and it was like, when are we actually going to learn?!? The testing skills should somewhat follow, even if some prep is necessary."

I think they are a total waste of time at school. All the time we wasted to get ready was so we could evaluate the time we had already spent during the year learning. You would think we would spend less time preparing to evaluate and taking tests and spending it on learning to actual material. There is so much information and so little time to grasp it in school that in the next 100 years, what are we going to be asking our children to do? We waste many resources and time on systems and processes that don't work the most efficiently and effectively it takes away from everyone's learning.

To be honest I am not sure what would be a good nation wide or even statewide way of evaluating kids with the money and system we have working now. I think the way we are doing things now is more to be efficient and cheap rather than getting the job done right. I know if we put more thought and energy into our education we could work towards better ways of doing what tests do and get more out of it.

Why on these tests are you asking questions about plot and leaf graphs for example (Which I NEVER see anywhere nor does my science or math teacher really,) instead of questions about critical thinking, cultures, and if you are redoing the test every year have some current even questions on there! Have something about why you think we are in Iraq, or what the best strategy at this point is. Why do we have so many subjects and topics left out and other somewhat pointless ones in the tests? Why are the tests so basic and far away from what people really educating me want me to learn, how far I should go, and have grasped by the time I am out of their class?"

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "This is kind of off the subject, but I talked with Dr. David Heistad today, Minneapolis Public School's testing coordinator. It was really interesting actually...I expected to be lectured to about how tests are great and all-important, since he's a coordinator and all...but what he said was totally different. He talked about test prep not being effective or efficient-- a waste of time, he said."

He also talked candidly and honestly about how the test scores of the MCA and NALT don't really affect students as individuals. (He did, however, state how it does affect us because it affects our school and teachers...big factors in our education) I also asked him some of the student questions, and got some good answers. I'll post those later, in pod cast form probably.

Anyway, my question is this: Dr. Heistad said quite clearly that he doesn't recommend test prep. He says it doesn't improve our scores and can even make us do worse because it causes stress. So where is the breakdown...teachers say they *have* to do test prep. The district testing coordinator says it isn't good, so he isn't making them do it. Who is? Is it principals? Are teachers inflicting this on themselves? Many teachers say it is a waste of time, so why then, do they spend so much time with preparations? And are they just adding not needed stress? Interesting..."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "I think it is like a game of rock paper scissors. You can have a cheap, fast, or good way of evaluating students. You can have two out of the three, but not all of them in one form of evaluation. Maybe we have to decide what we really want (if we were to redo the system,) once the information is all on the table regarding the implications. The schools would have to get the same information as policy makers so they could work to understand where the policy makers are coming from if they did not agree with the decision. Maybe the policy makers should look at what the schools say also?"

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) "Basically...(Dr. Heistad) admitted that the bubble-sheet tests may not be the best way, but they are the cheapest, which is what it all comes down to. It makes me kind of sad, to think they just settle for what's cheap...I mean, I don't want them to spend tons of money on us, but it just seems cheap and wasteful. Is this their retaliation to NCLB? They don't like it so they just aren't going to spend money on it? Well here's a news flash, people, NCLB isn't going to go away and we are spending money...wouldn't it be better spent using the most effective, innovative way of testing that is more useful and relevant to students? It just makes me feel cheated to know there are better ways out there...they know about them, but we aren't doing them because it costs more.

Here's something for those big decision-making guys to think about: We are the up and coming generation. We are the future. How do you want to prepare us? Do you want to challenge us? Do you want us to be ready for the world and be good, creative problem solvers? Do you want us to be able to think critically? What's important here? The current, cheapest way, or investing in the future?..."

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "I think what prep might be needed is just about how to take those tests well. It is something you have to learn to do. Other than that I could agree we shouldn't need to have test prep."

Mary Beth (Sophomore, Avalon Charter School) "I think we took around 8 major tests this year. We prepped the whole quarter. But my position on testing is that of usually any other student I don't like them because they give them so frequently that if you were to miss a day like if you were sick. Well if you miss a day the stuff you missed is usually on that test and if you aren't real clear on it then you usually get that question wrong lowering your self confidence so next test people usually do worse. But what I do like about test is they challenge your mind to do better in some cases and worse. If you remember stuff you learned so you can put it to good use. I would ask why so many small ones through out the year why not 4 medium ones during each quarter and why are they on stuff we don't really cover through the year?"

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) "The problem I think that teachers are facing is that they do not know how to prep students on how to take the tests. Not what they are teaching. If they are almost all failing at the teaching then maybe its the system or the resources/funding that is responsible for the 43% graduation rate among Minneapolis public schools that is to blame. We are not providing those great teachers with what they need to teach. Test prep about how to take a test well still takes time and energy. I believe testing often shows if students know how to test not whether or not they know the subject..."

Dena (Freshman, Southwest HS) “. . . increased testing definitely makes school more boring and relate less to what is going on around us. For example, in English class we spent, I think, two months learning word roots because it is a requirement because it is on one of the big tests. But we really should be spending more time doing things like reading about current events or other activities that use critical thinking and analyzing what we have read. That's my opinion on the matter.”

Mai-Eng (Senior) “I agree with the fact that student who are highly motivated would definitely do well on test because they already have a set up goal that they need need to pursue a higher education. Those who don't have those kind of motivations would not want to learn and just kind of slack off on school. In my opinion, it really depends on the individual too. When someone has the ability to cope with experiences that impact them, they have the desire to learn. And this will increase their chance of learning but for those who do not have the energy and do not want to try, testing will definitely make them less interested in the subject.”

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) “. . . I can tell you after reading what everyone is saying in here I am going to be a lot more chill on my test taking than I was before and I will probably do better. I think the schools and students have this scary perspective on testing that makes it seem worse than it really is. If we were given the correct information about these tests before we were going to take them I think people would calm down and be able to stop worrying to much about test taking.”

One forum discussion topic was, “Is there such thing as a good test?” The following comments come from that discussion:

Annie (Freshman, Southwest HS) “I have yet to have a really "good" test...but here's my idea of what that would be:

-The student taking it should understand it. They shouldn't look at a question and say, ‘huh??!’ In order for the results for a test to be accurate and effective, the student must be able to understand it.

-It should challenge students to think critically. They shouldn't be able to just fill in the bubble or circle a letter...they should have to use a thought process and judgment. They should have to answer why they answered that way...not just, ‘I did eenie meenie miney mo,’...which some kids do in multiple choice, they should be able to argue why they answered that way.

-Questions shouldn't be close-ended...like, ‘On what date did ____ happen?’ This doesn't involve student thought, it requires a file box memory, which some people don't have. (I have a friend who does have a file box memory and she always aces tests...I don't, which makes some tests more difficult and quite frustrating.)

-A good test has real-world application. Students should be able to apply the test material to their own lives, and relate it to things happening around them. This is important, because then the material on the test isn't just important to the test, it's important past the test, and students can understand it's relevance.

-Students taking the test should have an ‘ah-ha!’ moment. They should learn something on the test that makes them think in a new or different way.”

Dena (Freshman, Southwest HS) “Well, the point of the test is just seeing how much you learned on that subject. But to make the test a ‘good test’ I think it needs to be more than just. ‘Here, answer the questions and turn it in.’ In my opinion, a good test is not one with rigid requirements. A good test is one that has more flexibility to share what you learned in the way you want to. That's why I like it when teachers offer you a choice of different questions to answer for the essay question, or tell you you can either do ‘this, this, or this as your final question.’ Just any flexibility betters the test and is a better way for teachers to see what their students learned.”

Brett (Freshman, Avalon Charter School) “I would mostly agree. I think that people need to find ways to evaluate without testing if possible. I think testing can be useful, but so can just looking at students homework and class work. I think teachers can give students individual projects depending on the class and other factors. My school has no testing in high school (other than the state and nation wide testing of course.) Even the seminars avoid it when they can. I think there are other ways people can evaluate students as long as people are willing to invest time and money into other forms of it.”

ABOUT STUDENTS SPEAK OUT:

StudentsSpeakOut.org is an initiative of the Citizens League Minnesota 150th Anniversary Project (MAP 150). MAP 150's purpose is to find ways of cultivating citizens' ability to participate in designing public solutions by developing new spaces and roles that respect citizens' experiences and ideas as relevant to the policy discussion. People affected by the problem should be included in defining it.

StudentsSpeakOut.org is a project whose face is a social networking Web site. We are testing a variety of strategies for involving young people as active citizens by meeting them where they are (on the Web, using technology, and in both school-based and outside-of-school learning environments). The Web site was at first Minneapolis-focused, and has now expanded to all of Minnesota and Milwaukee, with potential for further expansion nationally.

There are forum discussions where students and adults raise questions and discuss ideas for solutions. We've "turned the tables" and asked students to act as commentators on the education-related ideas of high-profile adults in Minnesota. The Web site was also the host of the "I Am Minnesota's Future" Video Contest, a pilot-level contest providing a forum for students to articulate what adults and youth must do to ensure a better future in Minnesota.

There is a lot of behind-the-scenes work, too, that occurs to cultivate active citizenship and bring the site to life. For example: Student leaders from Minneapolis and from Minnesota's alternative-education programs have project coordinators who assist them in investigating topics of their choice on video and in written story, and who connect the students to decision-makers working in their scope of interest.

In Milwaukee, students learn how to use the site to address education matters they care about via workshops, and adults participate in separate workshops to learn how to support the students on the site. The workshop designs and in-person recruiting strategies built on the successes of Minnesota's site, and the strategies are succeeding (as evidenced by rapid growth of site participation—almost 143 new participants since its launch in mid-April 2008.)

There are a number of strategies for facilitating more dialogue amongst students regarding standardized tests, and other issues affecting students, using the site's discussion forums and cultivating student leaders to run the discussion. Most important to the students' willingness to participate is their trusting that there is an audience willing to consider their ideas. If that's you, and you would like to know more about working with Students Speak Out to involve students in your work, contact us: studentspeakout@map150.org