

HIGHLIGHTS of Research Brief #1: Testing Today in Context: History, Impact, and Alternatives

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The complete text of CR_eATE Research Brief #1 can be downloaded at: <http://createchicago.blogspot.com>

At a time when standardized testing has come to dominate educational reform in Chicago and across the nation, and test results have come to define success and failure, it is important to counter several common misconceptions around testing. Toward this end, CR_eATE (Chicagoland Researchers and Advocates for Transformative Education) has produced a policy brief that uses research in the field of education to demystify how testing—particularly high-stakes testing—has come to serve as not only the mechanism of assessment, but also the foundation for teaching and learning. The brief draws on research to address the history of our current approach to educational testing; the reasons why even testing experts are concerned; the impact of this singular focus on how assessment is defined and practiced; and the range of assessment alternatives that exist, but have been ignored in current debates. In doing so, it presents the facts about testing today.

Misconception: *Testing is the way we've always measured learning.*

Facts:

- *The modern era of testing began at the turn of last century.*
- *Testing is based on that era's faith in science and the needs of industry at that time.*
- *Tests were used to sort and differentiate more than to assess learning.*
- *Tests are now being used as evidence of schools' failure.'*

To understand the role of testing today, we need to look back in time and examine the social, political, and economic factors that influenced school reform over the past century. We might begin by asking a basic question: Why do we believe in the value of testing and the significance of test results as a basis for educational decision making? Some adults may respond that “it worked for me” or that this is “what we’ve always done,” but history tells us that testing arose in particular forms, for particular reasons, and with particular goals.

Misconception: *How one performs on tests is an accurate assessment of one's learning.*

Facts:

- *Tests designed to compare student performance are being misused to assess learning.*
- *All test scores contain error.*
- *Tests vary in their validity, or how well they measure what they are supposed to.*
- *No big decision should ever be made on the basis of a single test score.*

Most measurement experts hold tests to strict and high standards of purpose, reliability, validity and limited use. Unfortunately, some users and publishers do not. It is up to us to hold these institutions accountable to the standards of the field of measurement.

Misconception: *Testing is the best way to ensure that teachers are teaching well.*

Facts:

- *Testing and test preparation have narrowed the curriculum.*
- *Pressure to raise test scores is driving good teachers from the profession.*
- *Reading scores have not risen in Chicago, and the racial achievement gap has grown.*
- *Most high-scoring Chicago schools have low rates of student poverty.*

Until the mid-1990s, standardized tests taken by students in Chicago (and in most of the United States, for that matter) were decidedly low stakes. That changed in 1995, with a mandate to bring strict “accountability” and higher test scores to the state’s largest district. Seemingly overnight, standardized test scores were being held up as the new—and sole—measure of progress for students and schools in the city, and moves toward a more structured, prescriptive curriculum were underway. In many schools, the tests now were the curriculum, and the impact on both students and classroom teachers was palpable. For

students, this meant a curriculum narrowed to little more than reading and math, and more time devoted to test preparation. For teachers, this meant reduced autonomy, increased stress levels, and decreased job satisfaction.

Misconception: *Standardized high-stakes testing is a necessary evil.*

Facts:

- *Finland, one of the world's highest-scoring nations on international assessments, has almost completely abandoned standardized testing.*
- *Complex thinking and skills are poorly measured by multiple-choice tests.*
- *Portfolio and performance-based tools assess and foster more meaningful learning.*

Some people still ask: Even given the flaws and drawbacks, don't we need some form of standardized testing? Aren't equity and quality ensured by standard, uniform measurements? Aren't tests a necessary feature of a globally competitive, world-class educational system? Research shows compellingly that the answer to these questions is, no. Assessment is a necessary part of teaching, of curriculum planning, and of educational policymaking, but it does not follow that high-stakes standardized testing is the only tool that can be used for assessment purposes.

Misconception: *Testing is here to stay, and there is nothing we can do about it.*

Facts:

- *A variety of alternative assessments can be used in place of high-stakes tests.*
- *High-performing schools are using authentic assessments.*
- *Teachers working together can change testing policy.*
- *The public can, and should, speak out against high-stakes testing.*

The harsh realities of high-stakes testing have permeated our communities and psyches for the last several decades. With the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) up for reauthorization, it becomes critically important for communities to take proactive stances against high-stakes standardized testing. Throughout the city and the nation, efforts are underway to interrupt the dehumanizing trend of high-stakes standardized testing as the sole measure of academic achievement. **CReATE** seeks to support the movement of everyday students, teachers, families, and community members to stand against high-stakes testing. While research has the potential to benefit the lives of the aforementioned groups, it can only serve effectively if paired with concerted, on-the-ground, community-based action.

FOR MORE INFORMATION ON CReATE activities, or membership, or to read this full report and view other reports, please visit <http://createchicago.blogspot.com> or email createchicago@gmail.com

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Public education in a democratic society is based on the principle that every child is of equal and incalculable value. This guiding principle requires the fullest development of every member of our nation. Effective public schools are necessary to enable every member of our nation to reach his or her fullest potential. Schools in a democracy aim to prepare the next generation to be knowledgeable and informed citizens and residents; to be critical thinkers and creative problem solvers; to be prepared to contribute positively to communities, workplaces, and societies that are characterized by diversity and inequities; and to be healthy, happy, and prepared to support the well-being of others with compassion and courage. The children and youth of Chicago deserve no less.

CReATE, a volunteer group of Chicago-area education researchers, conducts, reviews, and distributes studies to address the needs of our students, parents and schools, and promotes citywide learning and dialogue about educational issues through free public events. **CReATE** partners with educators, public interest groups and community-based organizations. Our university-based scholars and educational workers are available for comment and discussion on topics raised here and in our policy statement, available online at: <http://createchicago.blogspot.com>