
Preface from Richard Phelps' *Kill the Messenger: The War on Standardized Testing*

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Why a War?

Public education's providers and consumers view education differently. Both want quality schooling and quality outcomes but they differ with respect to priorities. To parents, taxpayers, and their policymaking representatives, student achievement is indispensable – especially basic knowledge and skills. Schooling that fails to produce acceptable levels of knowledge and skills is considered defective no matter what else it produces.

To educators, knowledge and skills are important but not indispensable. So-called thinking skills, attitudes, and developmental outcomes are of equal importance. For example, many educators would consider students who have merely acquired positive self-esteem and an ability to work well with others to be educational successes. Whatever their view with respect to knowledge and skills, few educators believe that schooling should be judged primarily on the basis of standardized test results.

The war on standardized testing arises from this difference. Parents and policymakers favor testing as a way of knowing how much students are learning. By contrast, educators and their intellectual allies would prefer to replace tests with assessments such as portfolios of student work. *Kill the Messenger: The War on Standardized Testing* shows what is being done to achieve this goal and how it is being reported to the public.

Most of what is written about standardized testing in today's education journals is critical and disapproving. The absence of sympathetic scholarship creates the impression that standardized tests have few advantages and many shortcomings. Naïve journalists convey this sense of the situation to the public even though the opposite is closer to the truth.

Forgotten is the fact that for most of the twentieth century, teachers and schools routinely used standardized achievement tests to document student, teacher, and school performance. It was only when policymakers began holding schools accountable for test results that familiar limitations came to be regarded as fatal flaws. So long as test results could be publicized or ignored in accordance with local preferences, standardized tests

were considered a perfectly legitimate educational tool.

Once mandated, however, they became a threat to educator control of schools. Test-based accountability made it possible for the lay public and their elected representatives to form an accurate opinion of teacher, school, and district performance and to intervene if dissatisfied.

The Real Issue: Accountability

The public schools are a regulated monopoly and, as such, they must be concerned with public satisfaction. Until the publication of *A Nation at Risk*¹ and similar reports, the effectiveness of public schools went largely unquestioned. Their academic deficiencies were mostly unnoticed and tended to be blamed on the student, not the school.

Strict accountability applied more to budgetary matters, not learning outcomes. *A Nation at Risk* and subsequent reports, however, validated recurrent criticisms of achievement outcomes, and test-based accountability became an accepted element of the education landscape.

Policymakers generally came to recognize that schools need external accountability for the same reasons that banks and corporations need it. Organizations have an inherent conflict of interest in reporting on themselves. They seek to convey a positive image of their performance not the accurate one sought by consumers.

The recent spate of corporate accounting scandals well illustrates the phenomenon and the consequences of over-reliance on self-reports. Given the nature of organizational self-interest, rational consumers must trust, but verify.

The war on testing is characterized by technical analysis and high-flown rhetoric, but the underlying issue is far simpler: Whose interests will be served? From the standpoint of education's consumers, standardized

¹ In the early 1980s, then U.S. Secretary of Education, T.H. Bell, formed the National Commission on Excellence in Education, which later produced the famous report *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative for Educational Reform*. Some excerpts from the report's first paragraph:

"Our once unchallenged preeminence in commerce, industry, science, and technological innovation is being overtaken by competitors throughout the world. The educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people. What was unimaginable a generation ago has begun to occur – others are matching and surpassing our educational attainments.

If an unfriendly foreign power had attempted to impose on America the mediocre educational performance that exists today, we might well have viewed it as an act of war." (National Commission on Excellence in Education 1983: 5)

tests may be imperfect but they increase the likelihood that the consumer's aims will be served and reduce the likelihood that reports of student, teacher, and school performance will be colored by educator self-interest. From the standpoint of education's providers, standardized tests are undesirable because they restrict the ability of schools to set their own goals and priorities, and interpret outcomes accordingly.

Standardized tests assess student performance in light of announced objectives, and they do so in a uniform and objective manner. The portfolio assessments preferred by educators assess student work products selected ad hoc and evaluated in a relatively subjective manner.

The Larger Conflict

The issue of testing is only one facet of a larger conflict over the public's ability to control its schools. For decades, educators worked to convince Americans that scientifically trained educators could provide the highest quality schooling only if they were generously funded and free from social, political, and parental interference. Thus, independence for public schools became a cause advanced by teacher organizations, PTAs, school boards, and state education agencies. All became part of an institutional arrangement that supports and defends the independence of public schools as enlightened public policy.

Today and increasingly dissatisfied public is trying to reassert control but the buffers that were created to ensure independence are preventing reform. The complaints about schooling today are not from people who are anti-education but from parents, policymakers, and taxpayers who are dissatisfied with the quality resulting from the education community's stewardship.

There is growing public doubt as to whether schools are capable of or willing to carry out that which parents and the public expect of them. Many believe that schools have violated the public trust by putting their own needs and their own agenda ahead of the public's.

The War over Standardized Testing

The battle rages. As anyone who has been public critical of education can confirm, the schools are vigorously defended. Education-friendly voices are recognized and validated. Those that disagree are marginalized and attacked. The war on testing can be understood as an attempt to disarm the critics and quell the insurrection. Richard Phelps describes the defenders, the critics, and the conflict.

First, he sketches the battlefield – both the establishment forces and the emerging consumer groups. The consumer groups tend to be unfamiliar because educators disparage them and the media tend to ignore them.

Second, he provides the most comprehensive listing and description of anti-testing attacks and strategies available today.

Third, he gives detailed accounts of three separate anti-testing “campaigns” – against the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT), against a 1980s teacher literacy test used in Texas, and the attacks on the now-famous Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) during the 2000 presidential campaign. Studies of these three campaigns demonstrate how the attacks and strategies described previously are employed in practice.

Fourth, Phelps analyzes media coverage of standardized testing as an issue- in print, on television, in the education “trade press,” and even on the Worldwide Web. Using computer searches, he presents extensive evidence that the prevailing coverage poorly serves the public’s ability to understand both sides of the issue. Almost all of the published sources draw from education’s providers – the same sources relied on by school boards and other officials.

Fifth, he provides a compilation of the substantial body of research on standardized testing’s benefits – a literature that is mostly ignored by education’s providers.

Sixth, Phelps describes the limitations of standardized testing that should be widely known and accurately understood, but are so often the subjects of distortion and propaganda.

Finally, Phelps reminds us of the real-world need for external standardized testing. Schools are taking 12 years and spending \$100,000 per student to produce substantial numbers of illiterate teenagers. The public schooling establishment may argue that standardized tests are imperfect, but the consuming public and their children cannot wait. The economic and human costs of ineffective schooling are already horrendous. Standardized tests have limitations, but from the consumer standpoint they are superior to the known alternatives.

J. E. Stone, Ed.D., is founder and president of the Education Consumers Foundation (<http://www.education-consumers.org>).

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